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Pictures, Puzzles, and Missing Pieces: The Childlike Solution to Trauma in the Mature Novel

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PICTURES, PUZZLES, AND MISSING PIECES:
THE CHILDLIKE SOLUTION TO TRAUMA
IN THE MATURE NOVEL

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
English

by
Natalie Eva Couch
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Accepted by:
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ABSTRACT

Throughout literary history the child in literature has played multiple roles but was most frequently used as either a symbol for innocence or evil. In the case of three contemporary novels, *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* by Jonathan Safran Foer; *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* by Mark Haddon; and M. T. Anderson's novel entitled *The Astonishing Life of Octavian Nothing: Traitor to the Nation, Volume I: The Pox Party*, the authors use the image of the precocious child to evoke thoughts about learning and education. These three novels invite their audiences to experience an almost *anti-Bildungsroman* coming-of-age story by challenging the ability of reason to solve problems when faced with traumatic occurrences, such as death and betrayal. By asking their audiences to see the limitations of perceived absolutes, such as scientific facts and deductive reasoning, the authors evoke a relearning in the mind of their readers through the characteristics associated with the social construction of the child and childhood.

The texts additionally support this idea by using a series of conventions that each individually, and especially when threaded all together, touch on the theme of knowledge and learning. These conventions are child-like instances of play, which further bring around the ability for a child to reshape a reader's thinking. These elements of youthful play and learning are games, such as puzzles and storytelling, and visuals, which mimic a children's picture book. By manipulating the form of the puzzle and introducing alternative methods of thinking and viewing the world, such as through storytelling and visuals, the authors each loosen the authority of scientific reasoning and explore illogical contraptions for coping with tragedy.

DEDICATION

To my Muse and Nicolas.

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Firstly, I would like to express gratitude to Dr. Susanna Ashton who recognized my interest in children's literature and children in literature and who introduced all three of these important novels to me. Likewise, I am thankful for Dr. Michelle Martin for cultivating my love and interest in children's literature and provided me with multiple opportunities to continue learning outside of the classroom. I would also like to acknowledge Dr. Elisa Sparks who was brave enough to be my "blind reader," although she still had much insight to bring.

I am grateful to my parents, Anita and Fredrick Couch, and my sister, Nicolette Couch Daleske. It is with their continued support throughout my educational career that has allowed me to be at this point today.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: THE CHILD AS A VEHICLE FOR RELEARNING

Parents are always more knowledgeable than their children, and children are always smarter than their parents.

-Oskar, Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close

The young Octavian, now realizing the control the members of the College of Lucidity have over him and his mother, observes his mother as she lies on her deathbed. He notices the excruciating pain she feels as she struggles to swallow. He realizes the cause of all her pain—the small pox vaccine that the members of the college use on her as an experiment. They continue to experiment on her while she is dying by using the human body as an object. Octavian records his observation of his mother as she dies:

Her visage was an assemblage of holes, the nostrils flaring with each breath. There was no kindness, no gentleness to this departure; nothing human, but rather a degeneration into some demonic substratum of the body that had waited to lay waste to all the lineaments of grace. (222)

In this particular quote, from M. T. Anderson's *The Astonishing Life of Octavian Nothing: Traitor to a Nation, Volume I: The Pox Party*, Octavian struggles to remain the observant scholar he was trained to be while seeing first-hand the repercussions of scientific reasoning that excludes human concerns, such as emotion. His narration does not continue after this; all his readers encounter are the dark marks of scratched out words. He only regains a voice, a more silent voice, eighty pages later in the novel. Others' voices narrate the story he cannot tell. In his extensive education Octavian was only trained to be observant. No one ever told Octavian that he was allowed to feel.

In two other contemporary novels, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* by Mark Haddon and *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* by Jonathan Safran Foer, two other like-minded precocious children¹ are thrown into a similar struggle between reason and emotion when faced with tragedy. These three novels invite their audiences to experience an almost *anti-Bildungsroman* coming-of-age story by challenging the ability of reason to solve problems when faced with traumatic occurrences, such as death and betrayal. Instead of moving towards a position in society or learning through traditional types of education, the children attempt to resist these conventional characteristics of the coming-of-age story for an adolescent in favor of exploring emotion and coming to terms with unsolved problems. By asking their audiences to see the limitations of perceived absolutes, such as scientific facts and deductive reasoning, the authors evoke a relearning in the mind of their readers through the characteristics associated with the social construction of the child and childhood.

To relearn is to learn something again; perhaps something that was once learned, forgotten, and then later remembered. However, I use the term more specifically in relation to these texts to evoke the earlier stages of learning and processing information. Just as Toni Morrison questions our perceptions of the past through revisiting memories, these three novelists question the way we think and act after traumatic events. Similar to Toni Morrison's concept of "rememory" in her novel *Beloved*, relearning focuses not on the past event or instance of learning itself but requires a new way of seeing. Instead of

¹ I use the terms child and adolescent interchangeably in reference to the three young protagonists from the novels I deal with in this study. The stories span over years and chart the boys' development (or failure to develop) throughout this time span. While the boys could be largely characterized in the adolescent age range in these texts, I am using the characteristics of childhood in general to apply to these protagonists.

learning using the lens of an adult who has significant experience and knowledge already, a relearning in this context evokes notions of inexperience through the child figure and characteristics of childhood. By returning to the basic building blocks of knowledge and more importantly the early stages of experience, mature readers may be able to see constructive ways to cope with troubling emotions that they may have lost sight of how to cope with. Readers are relearning to see the potential of emotion from a child and they are also discovering this by being exposed to manipulated or incomplete types of traditional knowledge such as reason. The inconclusive endings to each novel also suggest that there are limitations to knowledge, which requires readers to turn elsewhere for closure. Readers relearn in part because the truth and solutions they search for are unobtainable sometimes and we must all come to terms with the unsolvable. The novels dealt with in this thesis question the mountain of truth we stand upon and require their mature audiences to rethink and relearn how to feel and act again.

The authors simulate a relearning for the mature readers who encounter the text by evoking thoughts of learning and then manipulating these traditional forms of education. First, the authors seat the protagonists at the cusp of learning—in childhood. They combine the child's capability to learn with the already precocious nature of the children. If the children develop in the story, they are less likely to do so in conventional ways, such as education and societal customs, because they already possess the intellect of mature individuals. However, as children, they are still inexperienced and lack the capability to communicate their difficult emotions effectively. Finally, the novels bring the precocious child into circumstances that align them with child-like types of

knowledge-building, such as games and visuals that resemble the basic building blocks of learning—a children’s picture book. While these three novels initially have little in common, they each contain significant elements that evoke a relearning in the mind of the audience: a precocious child, games such as puzzles and storytelling, and visuals, which are all set upon the backdrop of traumatic occurrences.

M. T. Anderson’s *Octavian Nothing* is a young adult novel set during the tense moments before and during the American Revolution. Octavian, the protagonist of the story, is highly intellectual and musically gifted, but he is also a slave. Octavian’s unusual circumstances as an experiment by the Novanglian College of Lucidity provide him with a superior education from birth—“equal to any of the princes of Europe” (Anderson 49). Unlike many other slave narratives, Octavian does not initially realize he is a slave but believes himself to be a free, African prince. Therefore, his *Bildungsroman* journey, at least as it appears in *Volume I: The Pox Party*, almost works in reverse from other slave narratives when it comes to educational growth and freedom. Octavian still struggles against his chains of slavery, but since he was raised as a learned being and not as a laboring object, he has already tasted freedom and education. Unlike those who are slaves from birth, he must learn how to “become” a slave from one of his father figures, a slave called Bono. Horrific events spurn his journey towards freedom, which he attempts to gain twice but initially fails to secure. Octavian specifically must deal with his mother’s death. His mother, Cassiopeia, suffers through small pox after being injected with the disease as part of an experiment the college performs in search for a vaccine. During her slow and painful death, the members of the college further perform

experiments on her. After witnessing their callous actions, Octavian wrestles with his training in reason before he ultimately chooses emotion over being observant and flees the college. During his absence from the college, Octavian's narrative continues through letters written by those who knew him.

Christopher, the protagonist in *The Curious Incident* by Mark Haddon, has a precocious nature comparable to Octavian's intellect. Christopher was born with Asperger's Syndrome, a type of autism, which causes him to excel at math but also to "find people confusing" (Haddon 14). He likes arithmetic and problem solving, like his hero Sherlock Holmes, but he does not like "proper fiction" because he cannot understand metaphors. Understandably, when someone murders the neighbor's poodle, Wellington, Christopher rejects emotional sorrow in favor of detective work. Although Christopher cares enough about the life of a dog to seek out the murderer, he resists feeling complex emotions throughout the novel. More challenges and puzzles arise when Christopher stumbles upon the murderer—his own father—and discovers his mother may not be dead after all. After he finds letters addressed to him from his mother, who his father has convinced him is dead, Christopher begins to question the motifs of the individuals around him. Never having left home alone, Christopher's fear of his father leads him to search for his mother in London. Haddon juxtaposes adult problems using the lens of the letters with Christopher's seemingly calm exterior, which is exemplified through the multiple mathematical equations and charts he supplies throughout the novel.

While Christopher and Octavian's unique situations allow them to compete intellectually with people twice their age, another sort of character named Oskar remains

mysteriously intellectual for his young age. Oskar Schell, the main protagonist in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* by Jonathan Safran Foer, knows the works of Shakespeare (he plays Yorick in the school production), invents new contraptions constantly (“What about little microphones? What if everyone swallowed them, and they played the sounds of our hearts through little speakers.”), and knows some French (“Ce n’etais pas moi!”) (1). Oskar’s intellect makes him somewhat of an outsider at school. The majority of his friends are all adults, some of which include the mail person and his grandmother. Despite his seemingly sophisticated exterior, Oskar grapples internally with death. Throughout the novel, Oskar struggles to cope with the grief of his father’s death, who dies during the terrorist attacks on New York City on September 11. Oskar’s inability to deal with his father’s death emotionally propels the novel into a Reconnaissance Expedition. After he finds a blue vase in his father’s closet, knocks it over, and discovers a key inside, the longing for a reconnection with his deceased father brings Oskar on a city-wide search for the meaning of the key. Oskar literally shows readers what he sees through this journey by including photographs he takes with his grandfather’s camera. Intertwined within this narrative, Foer threads a parallel story to Oskar’s search for meaning. Oskar’s grandfather can be seen similarly coping with life’s tragedies through letters that interrupts Oskar’s story.

The Child under Construction

These texts give their child characters distinct personalities, but their similar positions in relationship to the thematic concerns of the novels allow them to take on

symbolic characteristics. While there is no single realistic state of childhood because every individual child has different experiences, there is a collective and socially adopted idea of what childhood is, which easily allows the child and childhood to evoke specific ideas. According to social theorist Philippe Ariés in his study entitled *Centuries of Childhood*, “Language did not give the word ‘child’ the restricted meaning we give it today” until after the medieval period (128). Ariés describes the terminology we use to categorize the different “ages of life” as “purely verbal;” they are: “childhood, puerility, adolescence, youth, senility, old age” (19). Although these terms have shifted somewhat today, Ariés’ point still stands: childhood is not actually a fixed and definable age of life except for the way we think about it in our society; however, we do tend to group and assign certain characteristics to an individual based on his or her “age of life.”

The child in literature frequently takes on these personalities society assigns to him or her due to the stage of life the child is in. The early Romantics, particularly William Wordsworth, felt that children were more capable of connecting with nature and the soul because of their youthfulness and their distance from the corruption of the world. In *Romanticism and the Vocation of Childhood*, Judith Plotz furthers Wordsworth’s ideology: “Idealism, the power to impute meaning and value of the material universe, belongs in infancy to all human beings and in adulthood only to the chosen” (15). While modern critics overwhelmingly agree that the child as innocent is more complicated than Wordsworth’s Romantic ideals, we can see how children can easily take on characteristics based on their stage of life.

One of the characteristics generally associated with the child based on his “age of life” is learning. Ariés describes our perceptions of childhood as containing many characteristics such as dependence, games and pastimes such as fairytales, innocence and protection, and formal education. As a social construction, childhood sits in the early stages of experience and learning. Aries says, “In the everyday language of our contemporaries, at least of those connected with secondary education, public or private, the class or form is the essential unit which characterizes the situation of the child or youth” (176). Arguably, individuals constantly learn throughout life, but as Ala Alryyes observes, “we, however, tend to think of childhood in terms of age and the stages of education” (121). Alryyes’s more blatant connection between the child and education shows that learning is frequently a characteristic assigned specifically to childhood. Learning can range from formal education in the classroom to more casual methods of discovery through the playful interaction of games and stories, but regardless of the type of knowledge-building, learning is directly associated with the image of the child.

Similarly, many literary authors have used the child as a symbol for learning by exploring the child’s distinct capability for development. W. B. Yeats intertwines the child and school, therefore placing the reader’s mind more overtly at the beginning stages of learning in his poem, “Among School Children.” He more specifically evokes the notion of a relearning by placing the image of children in the very system developed for educational growth, school, and then by blatantly challenging this type of learned knowledge in favor of educating his mature audience in a new way. “Yeats deconstructs the value of the things taught by kindly nuns to their wards,” according to Nathan A.

Cervo's interpretation of the poem (31). While the nuns educate the children by focusing on smaller bits of more easily digestible information, Yeats uses the separation caused by breaking down information as an analogy for the destructiveness division causes in the world outside of the classroom, particularly concerning the events surrounding Ireland's struggle with British rule. Instead of finding the worth in separating information and placing bits and pieces into categories, Yeats questions this traditional teaching method and argues for unity in decision-making and allegiance. The classroom functions as an example of division, but Yeats also uses the school children in the classroom as a symbol of learning to stir up thoughts of education for his own audience; his audience discovers new ideas along with the children who are similarly being educated. However, I would categorize his purpose as a "relearning" rather than simply a learning experience, because Yeats invites his audience to think differently from the traditional modes of thought, differently from the children being taught on the page. Although Yeats deconstructs the particular type of teaching the nuns utilize, he still values the idea of learning in order to suit his political and personal agenda.

Another literary work, *Midnight's Children* by Salman Rushdie, stands out as an example of relearning through the child image. Rushdie uses the child—from before conception to adulthood—as the symbol of the historical birth and development of an entire nation. While the child grows, so does the nation; in fact, the country's birth coincides with the birth of the child, Saleem Sinai. In this case, the child in literature also symbolizes learning and more specifically a relearning for the adult audience, I would argue, because the children of midnight challenge preconceived notions of verifiable

knowledge. “As *Midnight’s Children* eloquently suggests, the history of a nation—the record of its birth, growth, and development—is also a cultural construct [like childhood], dependent on its culture’s inhabitants, or children, for form and meaning” (Pifer 154). By closely intertwining the personal and political, Rushdie throws fiction in the face of historical fact, thus demonstrating the limitations of historical accuracy as absolute truth but also the value of fiction as a tool for collective and individual memory. Rushdie educates his audience in favor of unverifiable knowledge by evoking learning through the symbol of the growing child and then complicating facts. Although the works of Wordsworth, Yeats, and Rushdie serve other purposes distinct from the novels I discuss here, both their works and these contemporary novels bring the child into circumstances that align them with types of knowledge-building.

One useful aspect of featuring a precocious child as a narrator is that it allows readers to identify readily with the knowledgeable child to a greater extent than they would with a more traditional child character, because they are both starting off as highly learned beings. This common connection aids the reader in seeing through the child’s eyes. In fact, the child often knows more than the reader. Critic Bill Greenwell comically mentions how author Mark Haddon “puts innumerable readers (this one included) into mental difficulty. Christopher thinks the statistics are simple; we don’t” (281). These types of situations reverse the adult-child relationship because the adult assumes the learning position. Also, the precocious nature of the child makes him a more reliable narrator, less of a “child” in the adult reader’s eye and more of a free-thinking individual. When the children begin moving and thinking in different directions, encountering

barriers to their logical thinking, the adult audience can more readily identify with the children and see themselves in the same position—as learned beings who must face the reality of the limitations of reason in the face of tragedy. This shift in focus away from education and verifiable knowledge and into realms of emotional concerns calls for readers to see the world differently. Although we are no longer in the Age of Reason or Enlightenment thinking, like Octavian’s contemporaries, we are still a society that often privileges reason over emotion.

Despite a degree of character identification that might result from the authors’ use of a precocious child, the choice of the authors to bring a child into the narrative as a major character and narrator produces a degree of friction in the narrative.

Precociousness aside, the child’s presence in literature still stands outside of the normative adult role, allowing it to shed light on themes by way of difference. As Roni Natov describes the common literary construction of childhood in her book entitled *The Poetics of Childhood*: many novels that employ the child character “represent childhood as a way of seeing the world—freshly, and viewed almost from the outside, as children essentially are outside the agency of the adult world” (191). In her book called *Demon or Doll*, Ellen Pifer notes:

Unlike the mentally or morally impaired, children can claim strength in incompleteness. From an adult’s point of view their vulnerability is an aspect of their power. Children are weak, socially as well as physically, because they contain so much potential...As human beings partially formed—half dressed, if you will—by culture, they hold out the

tantalizing if illusory promise of exposing human nature in its nakedness.

(19)

The child's potential, as Pifer mentions, is equivalent to their potential as learners. Their positions as outsiders to the adult realm or as learners both hinge on their stage of life. She also touches on the possibility difference has to create revealing tensions. The difference between the adult reader and the adolescent protagonist creates a tension between knowledge and experience. Similarly, within the very nature of the precocious child, another layer of tension arises between the intellectual nature of the child and his youthful innocence. This tension between knowledge and innocence reveals what children lack—the experience necessary to deal with their emotional situation.

Caution Children at Play

While the child figure in literature does not always evoke notions of learning or relearning, the focal texts of this thesis support this idea by using a series of conventions that, individually and especially when threaded all together, touch on the theme of knowledge and learning. The novels introduce child-like instances of play to further enhance the ability for a child to reshape a reader's thinking. These elements of youthful play and learning are games, such as puzzles and storytelling, and visuals, which mimic a children's picture book. Because each of these conventions found within the novels deconstructs our traditional preconceived notions of what learning entails, the novels ask their adult audiences to rethink the way they process information and therefore relearn in an untraditional manner. By manipulating the form of the puzzle and introducing

alternative methods of thinking and viewing the world such as exposing readers to storytelling and visuals, the authors each loosen the authority of reason and explore illogical strategies for coping with tragedy.

Puzzles infiltrate the texts in several ways throughout each novel. In general, each child participates in a discovery journey, comparable to detective work or solving a puzzle. While each boy does succeed in solving the ostensible puzzle(s), the authors alter the traditional detective genre form, moving the focus away from the logical procession of clues and a concrete solution. In particular, the novels do not end with the solution to the mysteries but continue on, providing further details of the child's life after he has supposedly found the answers and solutions to the problems. And even when the children discover the answers to these mysteries, the puzzles never end neatly because the child still experiences a degree of grief and uncertainty. Through manipulation, each novel deconstructs reason and logic in favor of focusing on the children's emotional turmoil.

I loosely use the term "puzzle" to encompass the different types of mysteries each boy seeks to uncover by using clues and being observant. These range widely from the actual "Reconnaissance Expedition" games Oskar plays with his father to the real life detective work he enacts throughout the streets of New York City. Christopher solves minor mathematical puzzles on numerous pages during the whole time he is working towards discovering the murderer of his neighbor's dog and how his supposedly deceased mother could be still writing letters to him. His puzzles are closer to the detective role Oskar plays; they could also be categorized as a murder mystery, but they still involve using clues meticulously to reach a grand, and logical, solution. Octavian likewise must

collect clues and make discoveries. In her review, “Slave to Science,” Jenny Davidson specifically mentions that “Octavian solves the puzzle of his treatment with the help of the college’s slave Bono” (n.pag.). Although the discoveries Octavian makes are not to be taken lightly as puzzles, they still fit the form of a logical procession of clues to arrive at an answer.

Through their use of puzzles, these detective-like works of fiction expose the healing power storytelling and stories can hold for a grieving child. Firstly, the child narrators initially choose the detective genre because problem-solving provides them with a sense of order and thus stability in chaotic situations. Similarly, the creativity and agency involved in writing one’s own narrative helps the child to cope with difficult emotions by allowing them to confide in the narrative when they feel they have no one else to turn to. Stories themselves play a pivotal role in the shaping of each young protagonist’s thought development by providing examples of experiences about which the children would otherwise be unknowledgeable. However, the texts seem to privilege the act of storytelling and the story over the order and reason the detective structure provides, because the autobiographical accounts continue well after the protagonists find solutions to the puzzles. By revealing the benefits of storytelling and the story, each novel suggests that reason alone cannot solve all problems.

Lastly, each contemporary novel creates a puzzle of its own for its audience by employing pastiche techniques that defy conventional genres of writing. The authors use a mixture of literary genres and styles of writing, visuals and text, and multiple narrative voices. Through the web of images and text, readers must discern image-text

relationships as well as the differences in genre forms and how these affect readers' interpretations of the story. The visuals interrupt traditional patterns of reading and open up a discussion about the limitations of language while simultaneously exposing the boundaries of their own form as visuals, closer to literal representations of reality than language. Both types of signs—text and image—can never fully communicate the ideas they represent. Likewise, each boy's emotional turmoil can never be fully expressed or understood because of the limitations of communication inherent within these signs. These restricted boundaries of language appear most frequently when "the extremes of pain and loss can be signified only by the text of no text," as Walter Kirn explains (n.pag.). Similarly, the visuals expose their own limitations of communication when the sight of a visual often conveys very little. Throughout Foer's novel particularly, readers are constantly bombarded with images that are difficult to connect with the text, that oppose the text, or that contain visible gaps or missing images. Through the manipulation of signs, the authors play with our preconceived notions of communication and force us to see our own human limitations.

Additionally, visuals, in an otherwise traditional novel structure, mimic a children's picture book. Visuals and child characters are more characteristic of picture books, which in turn evoke the beginning stages of learning for a child and ask readers likewise to position themselves as new learners. In her treatment of Art Spiegelman's graphic novel, *In the Shadow of No Towers*, Katalin Orban similarly claims, "The analogy with children's oversize picture books takes on another meaning here: *No Towers* is about the desire and challenge to see differently, relearning to see despite one's

overexhausted eyes” (75). Orban finds the various visual methods used in *No Towers* to resemble children’s picture books, therefore symbolizing ways of “relearning” (a term I borrow from Orban and apply to a wider range of texts and types of instruction) or “intimating the difficulty of ‘getting the picture’ after a historical and personal shock” (19). While Anderson, Foer, and Haddon’s novels lack the type of visual techniques that Spiegelman’s book employs, they all share similarities with the genre of children’s literature. All three authors invite readers to look at the text and images in conjunction with one another and reevaluate how we interpret visual forms. A child’s basic understanding takes us back to the elementary stages of thought processes and development, asking for a relearning, yet the precocious nature of all three children allows for a deeper connection with adulthood and the situations in general.

But What Are You?: Border-crossing and Criticism

Furthering the idea of a relearning, the novelists constantly challenge notions of genre by creating a hodgepodge of literary styles and techniques, particularly the inclusion of images that mimic children’s literature. Readers may question what type of text they are reading when they encounter images. Is this work a novel, an illustrated novel, or a graphic novel? None of the novels fit into any of these categories neatly. Traditional novels do not usually incorporate visuals. These novels do not include illustrations per say but rather images such as photographs, mathematical equations, and internal documents. Graphic novels contain a higher percentage of visual images than any of these and create an extensive image-text relationship these novels arguably lack.

Furthermore, for what age reader are these novels intended? The publisher and author of *Octavian Nothing* deems the novel appropriate for young adults and thereby asserts its position as young adult literature, but numerous reviewers question this placement due to highly sophisticated language and often horrific plot details (such as the collegiate scholars' throwing cats off the roof, in the name of scientific pursuit, to see from how high the cats can be thrown before they stop landing on their feet). In Gillian Engberg's review of *Octavian Nothing* in *Booklist Online*, she admits the novel might be difficult for its teenage audience: "The story's scope is immense, in both its technical challenges and underlying intellectual and moral questions...Anderson's book is both chaotic and highly accomplished, and...it demands rereading" (n.pag.). The other two novels do not straddle the line between young adult and adult fiction in such an obvious manner, but they do still bend conventions. The blurb on the author in *The Curious Incident* mentions Haddon's direct link to juvenile literature: "Mark Haddon is a writer and illustrator of numerous award-winning children's books and television screenplays." In her review of the novel, Nani Power considers the novel cross-generational, "very neatly walking the line between adult literary fiction and young adult" (n.pag.). Power's own eleven-year-old son read the book, and the novel inadvertently caters to this audience because of the simplistic language in which Haddon writes as an autistic young adult character. Likewise, Bill Greenwell points out in his essay, "Its language and its character's age make it accessible to anyone over the age of thirteen or 14, since teenagers like to laugh at themselves as well as adults, and adults like to laugh at teenagers even more than at themselves" (282). Lastly, while *Extremely Loud &*

Incredibly Close, clearly directed at an adult audience, challenges the boundaries less than its counterparts, the novel makes more extensive use of visuals than the others in this study. The extensive inclusion of images in *Extremely Loud* resembles a children's picture book or graphic novel.

My intention, however, is not to categorize these novels in one genre or another, nor is it to throw the status of these novels as either adult or young adult into question but to use this uncertainty to bolster my argument. All of these pastiche techniques symbolize and create a filter that pushes and pulls to help create a new way of looking and discerning information. In addition to rereading the text as a whole, the novels' transitory place among different genres encourages a rereading of the child voice, games, and visuals within the text itself. More importantly, however, the idea of these novels as genre bending plays directly into the idea that the multiplicity of the texts points toward a relearning. If readers are required to read the surface of the novel in new ways that defy convention, then this practice will certainly come in handy when the text requires them to rethink traditional notions of thinking and reasoning.

By sitting in their own unique category, each novel fails to be defined by only one type of literary genre and the scholarship that has come before it. In a way, what we already know in the conventional sense does not apply here. In addition to supporting the idea of a relearning, I use all of these uncertainties to introduce a wide range of literary criticism into my argument. Because of the potential cross-generational appeal of these novels, children and young adult literary criticism is useful along with their work in visuals and image-text relationships. However, since these texts distort the relationship

between pictures and words, I also borrow from visual criticism in general. These novels employ detective/mystery genre techniques (or rather manipulate these conventions) and lend themselves easily to theory on trauma. All of these types of scholarship are necessary to discerning the novels' themes.

CHAPTER TWO

CHILD'S PLAY: PUZZLES AND STORYTELLING

In a murder mystery novel someone has to work out who the murderer is and then catch them. It is a puzzle. If it is a good puzzle you can sometimes work out the answer before the end of the book.

—Christopher, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*

In the mind of the reader, the child in literature easily evokes or symbolizes learning because, although we are all always learning despite age, the child stands at the very foundation for study—bridging the gap between complete naivety and experienced knowledge. But for a child, knowledge and experience-building go beyond the traditional classroom. Play can also be a tool for learning and is an element that we frequently associate with children. By playing, children can replicate aspects of reality in order to build knowledge and know-how without experiencing the events themselves. In *Play as Development*, authors Annie L. Butler, Edward Earl Gotts, and Nancy L. Quisenberry, say, “In [children’s] play, they practice the real tasks and roles they will later assume” (11). For instance, children play house to practice taking care of themselves or board games that develop their problem solving abilities. *Extremely Loud, The Curious Incident*, and *Octavian Nothing* are all novels that use instances of play in the form of games such as puzzles and storytelling, to blur the line between fiction and reality, reason and emotion, when traumatic events are present. The child and games work together to conjure up images of learning and fun, but each of these novels also use the idea of games to alter the reader’s perception of fact and fiction. In the case of puzzles, various pieces of the form of the game are altered thus shifting the focal point away from linear, scientific modes of thinking and solving problems in order to focus on the individual and

their emotions. Similarly, storytelling, despite its definition as untruth, provides the control and creativity necessary to continue acting rather than simply reacting as a victim. Through “game playing” the adolescent narrators of these three novels attempt to work through their emotional trauma and demonstrate that to these bright but overly ordered child narrators, “the world is not just a series of puzzles to be solved by...prodigious powers of logic” (Gilbert 246).

Acting Out: Games and Agency

Playing can help the child to cope with emotional events in at least two ways. In the essay entitled “Time Out: Trauma and Play in *Johnny Tremain* and *Alan and Naomi*,” Margaret Higonnet points out two methods for dealing with emotional trauma for the child: “The psyche may take refuge through repetitive play and reenactment, or through numbness disconnecting the self from emotions and from the events” (Higonnet 152). Play in the three novels I study here often works in favor of both readings. Games serve at times to distract and at other times to help the children cope with foreign and illogical situations by allowing them to use the rules of play to interact with these situations in a way they can handle. Higonnet argues for the worth of play for the traumatized child using Myron Levoy’s young adult novel, *Alan and Naomi*, as an example:

While Myron Levoy certainly does not embrace easy optimism about a child’s recovery from trauma, he does use the *topoi* of play and toys that some readers link to romantic notions of childhood innocence and freedom. Thus, some suggest that he idealizes his child protagonist Alan

Silverman, his friend Naomi Kirshenbaum, and play itself. I would suggest that Levoy consciously introduced play as an instrument of therapy. He writes, "I was . . . aware of the idea of gameplaying as a tool in analysis."
(157)

Through Higonnet's study of similar novels that situate the child character in circumstances of tragedy, readers can link elements of play, such as puzzles and storytelling, to a healing process for the child. However, these texts present a complicated view of coping by way of play. Games, whether based on deductive reasoning or creative writing, help the child in literature to make sense of his or her world by allowing the child to perform rather than proving them with answers.

Games help to establish agency in otherwise victimized individuals by allowing them to act, rather than simply reacting to their circumstances. The structure of a tragedy inevitably sets up a victim to suffer, but by creating a method for children to cope with emotional events on their own terms and through their own abilities, the child in literature is able to break away from the mold of child as constant victim through the empowering elements of play. Through the dynamic relationship of player and game, each boy breaks out of the passive role trauma would otherwise assign them to by participating in constructive acts of discovery and personal expression. Though the youthful characters are not able to fully comprehend their situations nor are they able to completely control their world, they are on a smaller scale attempting to reconcile the irreconcilable, by simply living and acting.

Society and literature have continuously had conflicting views about the child and trauma. Richard Flynn's unpublished conference paper on post-9/11 children's resources found a contradictory image of the child as victim and agent in society's mind. In his study on Scholastic bookseller's post-9/11 resources he noted, "The message of their rush to mobilize resources for children after 9/11 is that (with expert help) adults can best help children by defusing difficult emotions, encouraging blind patriotism and superficial unity, and silencing problematic discourse, including dissent" (10). Mixed up in all of these call to actions is the child who is inexperienced yet intelligent and requires more than a covering-up of the tragic circumstances that arise around them. Flynn reminds us "we need to combat this image by recognizing that children are reading, writing, speaking, living human beings" (10). *Octavian Nothing*, *Extremely Loud*, and *The Curious Incident* work to secure subjectivity in the traumatic child by providing them with the means to act positively in the face of confusion and grief through games while at the same time recognizing that tidy solutions to life's tragedies are not always obtainable.

As Flynn points out, adults often have a tendency to wish to protect children from emotional events, such as death, but while they "defuse difficult emotions" and "silence problematic discourse" for children, adults often do the same to themselves. Each text furthers the possibilities of games and play by extending the notion to effect the adult readers, thus bringing in the idea of a relearning. The authors transform children's games into highly sophisticated learning mechanisms by manipulating the form and conventions or by simply using the relationship they have with creativity to invoke the powers of fiction. Readers must return to a child-like state in order to view the world anew again.

The novels each seem to suggest that instead of acting and properly dealing with our emotions we have become either numb or hyperemotional to tragedy and we need to learn how to act in positive ways again.

Piecing Life and Art Back Together

While games in general function as a tool for establishing agency for the child character, puzzles as a specific type of game, play a pivotal role in these texts because it is through puzzles that readers and narrators encounter the necessity of a relearning. The structure of each novel plays a significant role in the idea of a relearning if readers treat each episode as an individual puzzle. On a more general level, the mixture of visuals and multiple textual genres creates several levels of interpretation and relationships a reader must decipher. However, while the audience is piecing together aspects of the novel's form such as image-text relationships, the text is similarly prompting the need for both protagonist and reader to assemble clues in the form of puzzles or detective work. The unconventional puzzle or rather detective genre form of each novel forces a deconstruction of the absolute value of reasoning when trauma, emotions, and individuals are involved. The manipulated form of the puzzle shifts the focus away from a logical procession of building clues to arrive at a solution and instead focuses on the reason for the journey and the reality of life itself. Altering the detective genre structure allows each author to illuminate themes that go against the grain of scientific and mathematical thinking, thus inviting a relearning of the material.

In each novel, the protagonist searches for truth by being observant and using reason to find clues. In a sense, each boy finds himself the detective of his own mystery. For Octavian the mystery he solves is of his “use” as an experiment and position as a slave. Similarly, Christopher in *The Curious Incident* searches for the murderer of his neighbor’s dog and eventually the mystery of his deceased mother’s letters. Oskar in *Extremely Loud* must find the purpose behind the key he finds in his father’s closet. Since the authors introduce the boys as highly precocious characters, the puzzles initially seem to serve as a tool to demonstrate and reinforce the same values of reason and logic instilled in each young mind. However, the authors deconstruct the worth of the clues and the mysteries themselves by altering the structure of the mysteries in the larger context of the novel when compared to a more traditional detective novel style. The clues, although they may fuel the plot initially, are not a means to all ends for the story.

The traditional detective genre works by initially setting up a problem, providing clues to the case, and finally solving the mystery. In *Narratology*, Mieke Bal discusses the importance of keeping an audience only partially aware of possible solutions during a mystery narrative by providing hints and not announcements. She insinuates that if readers are given too much information “the game between reader and story” fails to secure an attentive audience (65-66). If what Bal says about the classic mystery novel formula is correct, then readers would not want to continue reading a story much further than the end of the solution. By the end of each novel treated in this study, the protagonist’s role as detective has long been over, the mysteries solved, yet the stories continue, which suggests the importance of the puzzles is not the process of deductive

logic to derive at a solution but the journey and emotional understanding the boys gain from the experience.

Other authors likewise manipulate the form of the puzzle in order to call attention to issues outside of the typical mystery form. Michael Thomas finds a similar “frustrated search for truth” in the mystery format of the novel entitled *La colmena* by Camilo José Cela. The author of the novel alters the mystery format by ending *La colmena* with an unsolved puzzle. Thomas lists the many difficulties a reader encounters when reading the text and the results these barriers produce:

This puzzle is never satisfactorily resolved, because many of the pieces are missing; others are blurred by an uncooperative narrator, misinformation propagated by certain characters, and a fragmented narrative. Rather than writing an explicit essay of social protest, Cela causes us to experience injustice by using an original narrative device: the invitation to a mystery in which the narrator purposely frustrates us all the way to the story’s end. The truncated ending forces us to come to terms with the limitations of truth in this fictional world, which is, in fact, a microcosm of the real world. (219)

By manipulating the structure of the typical mystery novel, the author implicitly rejects or complicates the values inherent in this form—that reason is the main means to solving life’s problems. Another example of deconstructing detective fiction can be found in Helen Oakley’s essay entitled “Distrubring Design: Nabokov’s Manipulation of the Detective Fiction Genre in *Pale Fire* and *Despair*.” In Nabokov’s works, Oakley finds

new meaning in the genre shift when the detective role is taken out of the triangle structure of villain, victim, and detective. She characterizes the change by saying, “This lack of a rational problem-solving presence has the effect of placing much more than usual emphasis upon the role of the victim and villain” (481). Although in the case of the novels treated here, the puzzles are solved and by a detective type character, these texts relate to *La colmena* and Nabokov’s detective fiction because they too have an altered mystery form which causes the audience to rethink the presence of the puzzle. Instead of simply suggesting there are limitations of truth (although the novels do demonstrate the limitations of absolute truths when the human factor is involved), the pastiche texts work to support a relearning of the “truths” we already know. The logic behind solving puzzles is evident and valuable, but the novels more importantly dwell on the individual and the ability to deal with and respond to emotional turmoil—an irrational occurrence, which lasts long after the detectives solve the mysteries.

The young protagonists are constantly struggling against their detective-like intuitions when faced with challenges that cannot be solved through logic or reason. For example, Octavian is constantly being told to be “observant” by the members of the Novanglian College of Lucidity. He recalls, “Above all, brought up among the experiments and assays of these artists and philosophers, I was taught the importance of observation” (9). This observant role, privileging scientific detective work, forces Octavian to constantly view the world around him through an objective lens. Commenting on the role of observant detective work, such as the type found in the Sherlock Holmes series, Catherine Belsey, finds the purpose of detective genres:

Is to dispel magic and mystery, to make everything explicit, accountable, subject to scientific analysis...The stories are a plea for science not only in the sphere conventionally associated with detection (footprints, traces of hair or cloth, cigarette ends), where they have been deservedly influential in forensic practice, but in all areas. They reflect the widespread optimism characteristic of their period concerning the comprehensive power of positivist science. (59)

The colleagues of the College of Lucidity would certainly approve of the formula for this genre, yet this same role—dominated by reasons and factual clues—ironically leads Octavian to find the injustices of enlightenment thinking rather than the usefulness of the experiments performed upon Octavian and his mother, Cassiopeia. Instead of discovering the value of experiments performed to find possible small pox cures, Octavian sees the experiments they perform on his mother as horrific, challenging the enlightenment thinking which preferences scientific pursuit. Although the scientific reasoning of the detective role allows him to solve the puzzles, the importance of the solution moves beyond scientific discovery and into the realm of emotional concerns. Anderson juxtaposes reason with emotional matters to show how neither can stand on its own and both are inextricably valuable.

In her *New York Times* review, Jenny Davidson remarks, “Octavian’s only flaw as a narrator may be the extent to which he has taken to heart the college’s lessons of lucidity, making his voice less immediately engaging than Anderson’s earlier teenage narrators. . . . Octavian’s own battle between rage and reason is resolved on the side of

reason, possibly at some cost to the reader's ability to identify with him" (n.pag.) While Davidson's main concern is with reader identity, she uncovers a valid observation. Octavian does seem to side on behalf of reason by the end of the story, but Octavian's definition of reason changes. The journey he takes complicates this affinity with reason and exposes the limitations of strict reason in favor of a more humane manner of thinking. His observant skills serve him well but these clues lead him to incorporate ethical values into the equation and realize the limitations of being observant without considering moral factors. Octavian finds that the human factor can introduce unethical principles, such as greed, and disrupt reason. He mentions at one point in his iron mask confinement, "I was become so Observant that I could observe nothing" (317). Despite his ability to discover his role as a slave living in the façade of freedom, Anderson creates situations that are beyond the solutions his traditional education in strict reason and scientific pursuit would allow him to solve. Octavian must find alternative outlets outside of reason in order to cope and secure freedom for himself, such as a connection with the slave community which provides him with a surrogate family. He receives inspiration and common knowledge particularly from Bono, another slave from the college.

Personal connections are frequently a reason or result of detective journeys throughout all three novels. While reason may secure success in a puzzle, the solution does not end each narrative. The stories each end when individuals have been (re)connected with one another. In Foer's 9/11 novel, Oskar's story ends after he reignites the relationship with his mother and finally puts his father's coffin to "rest." In *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, puzzles have multiple occurrences throughout the

novel and Oskar must similarly become “observant” like his equivalent Octavian. Oskar picks his way through his journey by reasoning that the key in his father’s closet is an important clue—to what, Oskar himself perhaps never knows. In a larger context, the detective role allows Oskar to cope with the trauma of his father’s death through distraction and purpose, but the puzzle more importantly bring him closer to his father’s memory and the people around him.

Oskar can’t sleep one night, so he sneaks into his father’s room because “It made [his] boots lighter to be around his [father’s] things, and to touch stuff that he had touched” (36). There he notices his father’s tuxedo on a chair and the puzzle of the key begins. Oskar says, “If I hadn’t noticed anything else weird, I wouldn’t have thought about the tuxedo again. But I started noticing a lot” (37). Like Octavian, who is schooled in observation at a young age, Oskar’s ability to solve the puzzle at hand lies in his reasoning skills and ability to notice. As soon as he happens upon the key in the blue vase, Oskar’s mind races to discern what type of key it is and why the word “Black” is written on the outside of the envelope. He thinks his father has left the key in the envelope as a clue due to their earlier adventures in detective work. Oskar informs his audience about his earlier relationship with his father and the puzzles they used to do. In his review of the novel, Walter Kirn describes the search for the blue vase key: “this scavenger hunt recalls the plots of countless children’s book as well as the puzzles that Oskar’s wonderful father...invented to educate his gifted boy about science, art and history” (n.pag.). Even beyond the grave, Oskar's father launches the most extensive scavenger hunt of all, only this time the journey to discovery does not involve simply

learning how to be observant and winning games. This background story works as a tool for foreshadowing the undesirable solution of the key's mystery. Oskar may find the purpose of the key but the solution does not rid him of his grief or bring him closer to any new major discovery about his deceased father.

The story of the puzzle Oskar's father gives him while he is still alive serves as a miniature parallel narrative to the whole novel itself. Oskar recalls, "A great game that Dad and I would sometimes play on Sundays was Reconnaissance Expedition. Sometimes the Reconnaissance Expeditions were extremely simple...and sometimes they were incredibly complicated and would go on for a couple of weeks" (8). The particular example Oskar provides is of an incredibly complicated game where he never ends up solving the puzzle. After digging through Central Park and finding messages in his father's *New York Times* newspaper where phrases like "not stop looking" are circled, Oskar still fails to find what his father wants him to solve. Although Oskar does eventually find the owner and reason behind the key's existence in the blue vase in his father's closet, the mystery does not teach him anything new about his father. In a sense, the Sunday Reconnaissance Expedition that ended up poorly echoes Oskar's same failure with the key. The difference, however, is that Oskar's search for the key's door reconnects him with his father—even after death—and teaches Oskar and the audience that not all problems can be solved through reason and scientific pursuit.

Oskar's earlier Reconnaissance Expedition does, however, provide his audience with a clue about the novel's structure as a detective story. Looking at a map of Central Park, Oskar connects the dots of his expedition to find the words "fragile," "door," and

“porte” (the French word for door). While Oskar finds himself exasperated with the unlimited ways of connecting the dots and discovering words through these lines, his mention of the word “door” as a possible clue gets his audience to think about where else they have seen doors. In fact, images of doors with keyholes and locks flourish throughout the novel.

This group of visuals pushes the whole novel forward from beginning to (almost) end. Although the narrative structure is not completely linear (there are multiple story lines that intertwine and letters and other documents jut forth from the text, interrupting the main story line), Oskar’s quest to find the owner of the key serves to move the main plot line along. As he progresses, the locks on the various pictures of doors begin to open, and the images reveal themselves more often. Towards the end, one photograph even appears of what could be taken as the safe deposit box key, complete with the string on which Oskar carries the key around his neck. As Oskar solves the puzzle of the key, the door metaphorically opens through the succession of photographs. The photos parallel the storyline even though the text never directly makes this link textually apparent.

Assuming this visual narrative follows closely along that of the text, we can assume the door symbolizes the barriers closed upon Oskar as he tries to cope with his grief, which is the actual reason for his journey. The journey, as Oskar even admits, will not bring him any closer to bringing his dad back. The search, however, creates the necessary connection that he feels he has lost with his father by allowing Oskar to search for a tangible solution (the mystery door) involved with an abstract search (a reconnection with his dead father). In an attempt to fill the void death creates, due to his

inability to deal with his emotions in a progressive manner, he almost purposefully searches for nothing. Oskar never fully grasps what he ultimately wants in his search—his father to come back to life—but the puzzle does bring him closer to the memory of his father and provide him with some degree of consolation and purpose.

The puzzle of who owns the key does not resolve all of Oskar's issues, however. It may have brought him to this particular stage, but the narrative does not end when Oskar solves the mystery, as does a traditional mystery plot. It continues on for awhile, implying that the individual journey is more significant than the solution. Similarly, the door knob images begin outside of the conventional boundaries of the novel. Before the title page, we encounter several pictures, the first of which is a close-up shot of a key hole and a door handle. Although Foer initially seems to use the door knobs as a symbolic tool of barriers overcome, the text does not fully support this reading. By disregarding traditional literary boundaries, the doorknob returns to its use as a tool of memory—a photograph of something that once was. Outside of Oskar's fictional world, the door knob allows a reader to enter into it but at the same time acknowledges the reader's role within the collective memory of the literary text. By writing a novel about a trauma that affected countless people, Foer privileges the individual's memory, but by inviting the text to be read, he suggests that each of our memories is equally significant, and everyone has experienced and felt loss at one degree or another.

At one point in this pictorial journey, a photograph appears of a wall filled with keys. If we categorize the picture in a group with the doorknobs and the safe deposit box key and view the images as a whole, the photograph is another stepping stone on the

journey. In fact, Oskar runs across a similar image in the narrative when he asks the locksmith about the key he finds in the blue vase. The image hints at the immensity of the task before him—each key represents a house he must visit. If we connect it to the images it stands near, however, the collage of images resembles Oskar's book, *Stuff That Happened to Me*. After the photo of the wall full of keys, there is a long spread of photographs. Since many of the pictorial interpretations privilege double readings, readers can look in two different directions to obtain meaning. The second reading questions the role these images play in Oskar's collective memory but also in the memory of the reader, and begs the question of how we process information and visuals, thus inviting the audience to participate in a relearning that parallels Oskar's own initial experiences with dealing with death and loss.

In addition to the manipulated narrative structure, the clues Oskar finds are often misleading and turn out to be false. In particular, Oskar arrives at an art store to uncover both the correct clue that launches his journey and the incorrect clue that fuels his emotional connection to the journey. With the help of the store clerk, Oskar discovers a correct clue first. The sales woman theorizes that "when someone tests a pen, usually he either writes the name of the color he's writing with, or his name. So the fact that 'Black' is written in red makes me think that Black is someone's name" (46). The logical deduction of clues to arrive at an answer makes sense in this situation. Next, however, Oskar views the pen testing pads and sees his own father's name and jumps to the logical conclusion that his father was in the store, despite the clerk's assertion that the pads were only put out after the death of Oskar's father. Later in the novel readers discover his

grandfather, not his father, wrote his name on the sheets of paper. Here the incorrect clues are valuable in the meaning they hold for Oskar rather than the value they could possibly hold for the purpose of the puzzle.

While each novel includes mysteries and puzzles to untangle, *The Curious Incident* positions the detective format as central to the story's plot and incorporates multiple levels of smaller puzzles in the form of mathematical and logical equations. Christopher remarks early on that he is writing a detective novel—purposefully drawing our attention to the genre—about the death of Wellington, his neighbor's dog, because those are the only type of novels he likes. In fact, the title of the book comes directly from a Sherlock Holmes's quote from Conan Doyle's short story "Silver Blaze" (Gilbert 246). Despite the direct connection to the infamous Holmesian detective structure and other smaller detective references within the novel, Christopher, like his counterparts Octavian and Oskar, solves the mystery early on in the novel. Ironically, however, Christopher does not so much solve the mystery as he is told who the murderer is by the murderer himself—his father!

Most of the visuals in the novel could be interpreted as a puzzle, and nearly every image serves as an explanation for a rational idea. Readers see a block with interlocking sides like a Leggo, a chart with prime numbers, and a formula for winning a game show. These small, visual puzzles represent Christopher's logical mindset and often work to make this type of reasoning appealing. For instance, Christopher uses The Monty Hall Problem to explain why he is so partial to math and to prove that numbers can sometimes be misleading, despite his teacher's affirmation that Christopher likes math because it is

“safe” and has “straightforward answers at the end” (61-62). The Monty Hall Problem proves that even mathematical intuition can be incorrect. Several scientists and mathematicians said that you would have a 50-50 chance of winning in a game show if you switched doors after the initial choice, but Marilyn vos Savant (who is, as Christopher asserts, the highest IQ holder in the world) and Christopher prove that you have a higher probability of winning if you switch doors. Although Christopher reveals the flaws of intuition in both mathematical and personal circumstances, he still reiterates a strong belief in the absolute powers of logic at the end of the math problem: “And this shows that intuition can sometimes get things wrong. And intuition is what people use in life to make decisions. But logic can help you work out the right answer” (65).

Haddon blatantly juxtaposes life decisions and logic to create a tension between the two. While the tension may be temporarily revealed when readers think about the solution to The Monty Hall Problem, Christopher increases it when his own lack of intuition almost physically harms him towards the end of the novel. Christopher is almost struck by an incoming train when he attempts to pick up his rat from the train tracks, because this type of situation is beyond Christopher’s previous experience. Logical thinking and clues cannot solve all of life’s problems because as Mr. Jeavons, Christopher’s teacher, reminds the audience, “In life there are no straightforward answers at the end” (62). Again, however, this situation creates a double meaning for the audience. In the very act of pronouncing his admiration for math, because it has mostly straightforward answers, and logic, because it can help you find the right answer, he is

writing his own story—one that is neither straightforward nor has all the answers to life's problems.

The Curious Incident does not include a parallel puzzle to foreshadow the mystery's solution, but the title does serve a similar purpose of predicting the end of the puzzle like Oskar and his father's game of Reconnaissance Expedition. Readers familiar with the Sherlock Holmes story, "Silver Blaze," can already predict to some degree who murdered Wellington. In "Silver Blaze," Holmes reveals the murderer through deductive logic:

"Is there any other point to which you would wish to draw my attention?"

"To the curious incident of the dog in the night-time."

"The dog did nothing in the night-time."

"That was the curious incident." (Doyle 196-97)

The scientific detective reveals the murderer by reasoning it must have been someone the dog knew otherwise the dog would have barked. Similarly, Wellington was killed by Christopher's father, a person the dog was already familiar with. Although Haddon does not instantly reveal the murderer through this intertextual connection, the clues are certainly less important to propelling the plot and stirring up reader interest, as Bal makes note of in her study on the detective genre, since Christopher and the reader solve the mystery half way through the novel. More significantly, however, the intertextual reference Haddon uses for the title of the novel demonstrates the importance the role of fiction plays for Christopher and for his readers.

Christopher, Octavian, and Oskar each actively participate in solving their own puzzles but because these puzzles are solved more importantly within their own personal narratives—each boy is both his own protagonist and narrator—they also actively defy the conventions of the detective genre. Each implied and actual author manipulates the genre to suit his need. The puzzles are an attempt to control their situations, but it is their thoughts and voices that ultimately succeed in telling a story worth passing on, not the propulsion of the mystery structure.

Using Storytelling and Fiction to Inspire and Educate

Stemming from the role puzzles play, the narrative form also invests in the importance of storytelling and stories because of the connection the puzzles have with the role of detective fiction in general. While on the surface the mysteries support the logical thinking inherited by Sherlock Holmes, the manner in which the detective stories are told, as personal narratives, provides fiction with as much power as reason when exploring traumatic events and the individual. As objects of creative writing themselves, the novels I study here expose themselves as self-conscious fiction when the narrators write themselves in as authors. Furthermore, the narrators often refer to intertextual elements as a means of empowerment. These literary techniques touch on the common postmodern idea of deconstructing supposed verifiable truth by exposing the subjective nature of the very idea of truth.

Stories and personal narratives go beyond the boundaries of metafiction when the children are given the right and ability to write their own stories. Readers can see the

similar postmodern idea of blurring the line between truth and fiction in *Midnight's Children*: "The memory of Saleem Sinai, the narrator in *Midnight's Children*, opposes official versions of India's history by appropriating that history—in all its ambiguous plurality and overwhelming multiplicity—as his own" (Pifer 154). Sinai's control of history lies in the control he exerts in his art—the ability to write his own story as distinctly personal yet inextricably connected with the political. Two of the novels, *Extremely Loud* and *Octavian Nothing*, do blend history and fiction together, lending themselves further to Rushdie's mode, but all three more importantly allow the child to control their situations through the act of art. The act of creativity—arguably a characteristic imbedded in the cultural construction of childhood—plays a large part in evoking subjectivity in the child as well.

Storytelling specifically plays a role in these novels because of its connection with tragedy. Mary Jane Hurst notes that "storytelling can serve as an escape or as a survival strategy for children" (98) in her book entitled *The Voice of the Child in American Literature*. Each child character uses the creative power of storytelling to both grab onto and make sense of the chaotic world around them and also to revel in the same aspect of play the puzzles provide. Writing his own narrative allows Christopher, Octavian, and Oskar to work through the intangible and unreachable. When dealing with illogical occurrences, such as tragedy, each character must look beyond reason and find alternative methods to deal with their grief and confusion. Storytelling provides the perfect vehicle for coping with loss. However, this is not to say that the child characters fully resolve all

of their issues. What they do achieve is a sense of self and a determination to carry their stories on, despite the harsh reality of life.

In the case of *The Curious Incident*, Christopher writes his autobiography as detective fiction. After someone murders his neighbor's dog, Wellington, Christopher employs the genre to tell his story; he states, "This is a murder mystery novel" at the very beginning of the novel (4). It is the only type of story he is willing to write, however, because Christopher does not like "proper" fiction. He emphasizes this dislike, "I do not like proper novels. In proper novels people say things like, 'I am veined with iron, with silver and with streaks of common mud. I cannot contract into the firm fist which those clench who do not depend on stimulus.' What does this mean? I do not know" (4-5). He cannot comprehend metaphors nor does he like them because he considers them lies. Christopher confidently goes as far as to change the structure of the traditional novel in order to better suit his own particular need for order and truth. In Chapter 19, Christopher acknowledges that "chapters in books are usually given the cardinal numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 and so on," but justifies his usage of prime numbers instead; "Because I like prime numbers" (11). He is a character driven by logic and often without regards to widely accepted literary conventions, as readers can tell by the often mundane language and straightforward phrases.

Separate from the character of Christopher, Haddon as author twists Christopher's characteristic dislikes into conventions similar to the ones he is opposed to. In spite of Christopher's statement, "This will not be a funny book. I cannot tell jokes because I do not understand them" (8), within this very statement, readers find delight. In Bill

Greenwell's essay, "The Curious Incidence of Novels About Asperger's Syndrome," he argues that "Christopher's digressions are one of the principal pleasures of the novel, and his poker-faced pronouncements are the funnier because they possess such bald logic" (281). Surely, as Greenwell suggests, Haddon redeems Christopher's inability to use literary conventions, such as metaphors, by replacing them with irony. Christopher even specifically explains his dislike of metaphors. He thinks a metaphor "should be called a lie because a pig is not like a day and people do not have skeletons in their cupboards" (15). Here readers comically find that Haddon has outwitted Christopher; the narrator might not like and want to use literary conventions in favor of strict facts and formulas, but the author sees the need to include irrational elements for a playful read.

Ruth Gilbert further explains the role narratives play in Christopher's life: "Fiction, and detective fiction in particular, provides a means for...Christopher...to make sense of [his] experience" (242). The order detective fiction provides allows for Christopher to deal with the chaotic world that surrounds him, but as much as he asserts his dislike for fiction, the very same role of creativity allows him to survive rather than the act of ordering and problem solving alone. The act of writing also permits Christopher to reveal emotions in his own way. While initially Christopher appears to lack much emotion because he does not respond the way the other characters do to unsettling events, he still feels happiness and sadness. For instance, Christopher defends his choice to write about the murder of a dog rather than a human. He recalls, Siobhan said "readers cared more about people than dogs, so if a person was killed in a book, readers would want to carry on reading...I also said that I cared about dogs because they

were faithful and honest, and some dogs were cleverer and more interesting than people” (5-6). By the end of the novel, Christopher uses his ability to write a novel as proof that he could achieve great things; “I found my mother and I was brave and I wrote a book and that means I can do anything” (221). Again we find the narrative scope reaching past the solution and digging further into the mind of the individual. Through the fictions already written, Christopher also finds role models who are able to experience things Christopher has yet to experience. This building of experience is especially necessary for Christopher’s journey because he does not have the capability to interpret actions and information he is naïve about.

His autistic condition, called Asperger’s Syndrome although the author never explicitly mentions this, prevents him from acting constructively when placed in new situations. For example, Christopher at one point in his journey to London jumps down onto the train tracks in order to retrieve his pet rat. As the train rapidly approaches, another man tries desperately to get Christopher away from the tracks: “Get out of there, for fuck’s sake,” the man screams and then attempts to pull Christopher out. Although Christopher has just seen and figured out how the “black boxes” and train communicated, telling the passengers at what time the train will arrive and other actions—**STAND**

BACK TRAIN APPROACHING—Christopher lacks the experience of an individual on the train tracks in order to react properly to the signs. He was easily able to figure out what the black boxes were by using his extensive knowledge about computers, but he was unable to physically react in instances of danger. In this situation, detective fiction and Christopher’s precocious nature are not enough to save him without external aid;

however, the structure of the puzzle and the experience gained from the detective genres allow him to make sense of other circumstances.

Likewise, Christopher finds strength in the fictional character of Sherlock Holmes by using him as experiences he has not experienced himself. Gilbert illuminates this function:

When faced with new and frightening situations, Christopher's mind goes into overload and his identification with the cool logic of Holmes becomes both more urgent and more poignant. In distress, he seeks a model in his hero: "And then I thought that I had to be like Sherlock Holmes and I had to detach my mind at will to a remarkable degree so that I did not notice how much it was hurting my head." (246)

Holmes as model exceeds the normative role a hero would provide for Christopher because Christopher's autism hinders him from knowing anything outside of his own experience. Moreover, Holmes as role model allows Christopher to identify with a character who does not exist in Christopher's world. As an autistic child, Christopher has a difficult time identifying with anyone else: "All the other children at my school are stupid," Christopher notes (43). This identity connection provides Christopher with real world experience and strength that reach outside of verifiable clues and puzzles. Characters and tales, whether fictional or historical, give the protagonists knowledge outside of their own realm of experience and education.

Fictional and historical characters equally impact Oskar's struggle to cope with his father's death after the attacks on the Twin Towers. Oskar, in a few ways, embodies

the emotional difficulties of Hamlet, and Foer makes this connection apparent by using intertextuality. When Oskar stands on his *Collected Shakespeare* set in order to reach the mysterious vase, it is “the tragedies [that] started to wobble” (37). To some degree, Hamlet appears in the form of the play and the character throughout the novel. Hamlet’s pictorial presence makes him known as early as page 55. Oddly enough, this image is juxtaposed next to the historical image of Stephen Hawking, Oskar’s stated hero and role model, although Hawking often plays a fictional role in the novel by interacting with the ink-and-paper Oskar. Even though Hamlet characterizes the inability to act, he does inspire some useful deeds. Like Hamlet’s theatrical production in Shakespeare’s play, Oskar uses an element of play—the puzzle—to search for a connection with his father after his death. However, unlike Hamlet or perhaps in spite of, because Oskar is aware of the negative aspect of inaction, Oskar comically retells the story of Yorick to suit his needs by acting when he is not supposed to. Oskar muses, “Maybe it was because of everything that had happened in those twelve weeks. Or maybe it was because I felt so close and alone that night. I just couldn’t be dead any longer” (145). So Oskar breaks out of character during the school production of *Hamlet*, and as Yorick, ceases to be dead any longer by speaking. By rewriting Shakespeare, Oskar finds strength in performance.

In the neo-slave narrative of *Octavian Nothing*, Octavian’s regulated schooling reveals the potential of narrative to enlighten a reader outside of factual concerns. For example, after the beginning of the college’s financial demise, Mr. Sharpe orders Dr. Trefusis to cease using narratives to educate Octavian in Latin and Greek. He finds power in the narrative form of Octavian’s origins. Mr. Sharpe tells Dr. Trefusis, “The subject’s

people are a story-telling people. Their converse is formed largely of tales of fallen heroes and the most absurd myths respecting talking jungle animals. Such propensities are hardly evidence of a rational society . . . Narrative, sir, is precisely what we wish to wean him from” (130). He states that narratives are irrational and unnecessary because they are not based on fact, yet there is an element of fear in his rhetoric, a rationalized concern if readers take into consideration the effect of narratives for Octavian.

Octavian’s teacher gives indirect strength to his will by giving him slave narratives from Classical Rome and Greece to translate, regardless of the order given by Mr. Sharpe. Octavian comments, “Dr. Trefusis guiding me without remark through stories of slaves who had achieved greatness. He prompted nothing; he betrayed by no comment that I should consider the courses described in these narratives” (128), yet Octavian receives inspiration as evident by his observations. While Dr. Trefusis does not explicitly plant the seeds of revolt in Octavian’s mind, through the power of narrative form Trefusis implicitly provides Octavian with a model for potential actions. And Octavian acts on these inspirations and escapes from the hands of the collegians—twice! Towards the end of the novel, Mr. Gitney, the headmaster at the College, even attempts to use a narrative as a moral, a lesson in the restriction of youth. He narrates, “So Phaeton fell, and the world burned...And all of that, my boy, all of it because he could not curb his juvenile desire for speed and escape” (333). The story of Phaeton plays a role in Mr. Gitney and Mr. Sharpe’s attempt to contain Octavian’s need for freedom. Gitney and Sharpe latch on to the narrative power to enlighten through example, and forgets its supposed lack of reason and truth.

Anderson further undermines Mr. Gitney and Mr. Sharpe's views about the worthlessness of narratives through the tangible novel of *Octavian Nothing* itself. By using the fictional novel, *Octavian Nothing*, as a tool to teach a young adult audience about slavery, racism, and history, Anderson insists that stories can be influential and educational. The author consciously picked this fictional genre of writing over other more "truthful" styles of writing, such as biography. Octavian's narrative itself is proof of the power fiction can bring to an individual and a society on whole, just as Octavian likewise gains inspiration and knowledge through the examples of the slave narratives he reads with Dr. Trefusis.

A comparable example of how the narrative form itself silently speaks volumes is with *The Narrative of Frederick Douglass*. Frederick Douglass, speaking from the antebellum era, relied on his narrative as proof that a black slave has the capacity of reason equal to his white master, which in turn supported his abolitionist goal. While Octavian as a character of the 18th century would need to confirm a similar message, the narrative of Octavian as written in the 21st century as a fictional story is exempt from this significance. Yet, Anderson closely replicates Douglass and other slave narratives in his neo-slave narrative, not only in content but visually. The clothing of the novel mirrors those of many antebellum slave narratives. Anderson views his role as a mere collector of letters, not author, and states that the documents inside are "taken from accounts by [Octavian's] own hand and other sundry sources" (Title page). The hardcover edition mimics a book with cut pages (with older books, a reader had to cut the pages in order to read the book for the first time). Sharon Rawlins, in her review of *Octavian Nothing*,

points out that “the novel is written in 18th-century language” and uses an extensive vocabulary, which is astonishing considering the age of the intended audience (n.pag.). Why then does Anderson strive to create a text so close to its predecessors from the antebellum period?

Since slavery has been abolished for quite some time in America, Anderson recreates an antebellum narrative, similar in appearance and language, to attest to the power of the fiction specifically. Since history remembers the memories later generations cannot possibly obtain, but history still cannot fathom to encompass all sides of being of all persons, Anderson seems to propose that fiction has a redeeming quality that might come close to accomplishing what history alone might miss, but it is the past that we need to remember. Literacy and reason alone could not provide Octavian with his freedom, just like reading about the history of slavery for modern readers cannot provide them with a complete understanding of the situation. Although reason and language can fail or fall short in the larger span of human needs, fiction and the act of storytelling prove to be positive tools. Storytelling for Octavian and for the modern reader is useful to pass the story on in order to relay the horror and truth of the past, despite the fictional status of the events themselves.

Octavian Nothing prizes the medium of fiction over other forms of learning despite Octavian’s constant attachment to reason. Part of this thematic shift, however, relies on the change in Octavian’s definition of reason. Like Octavian, we as readers should still be “observant” when we read a text, whether non-fiction or fiction, but we need to incorporate ethical judgments into these observations. The use of narrative to tell

an individual's tale—an emotional journey—can have beneficial effects for a reader, but these results often depend on an analytical eye. Some are positive and insightful but no text is absolute. Individuals construct truth from language, which can often fall short or contain negative rhetoric. For example, Octavian may gain strength from the Classical Roman and Greek slave narratives but Mr. Gitney and Mr. Sharpe try to use the story of Phaeton to curb these same desires of freedom and escape. Fiction is not necessarily rational, but it is still an analytical and insightful medium that can span various subjects including history, philosophy, sociology, and psychology. Mr. Sharpe tells Octavian, “You shall be debarred from literature and history. The history of a race fallen fifteen hundred years ago is, in any case, of little moment to us now. There is no utility in it” (131). Unlike Mr. Sharpe's belief, literature and history can inform, inspire, and change us in countless ways. Octavian's very act of writing ensures his story will be told and his narratives will inspire future generations as past narratives have inspired him.

In *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, Oskar slightly parallels Mr. Sharpe's admiration for facts and objections to fictional narratives, although not to the same radical degree. Oskar's favorite book is *A Brief History of Time*, which is a historical text. He recaps his favorite story in the book, showing his favoritism of facts over fiction:

Stephen Hawking tells about a famous scientist who was giving a lecture about how the earth orbits the sun, and the sun orbits the solar system, and whatever. Then a woman in the back of the room raised her hand and said, “What you have told us is rubbish. The world is really a flat plate supported on the back of a giant tortoise.” So the scientist asked her what

the tortoise was standing on. And she said, “But it’s turtles all the way down!” (11)

Oskar says, “I love that story, because it shows how ignorant people can be.” Oskar initially echoes Christopher’s dislike of fictional novels because both boys privilege facts above stories. However, stories are inescapable among all three novels even though their narrators strongly favor verifiable information. Soon after Oskar mentions his admiration for *A Brief History of Time*, readers see Oskar in an intimate moment where his father participates in the act of storytelling. Oskar asks his father, “Could you tell me a story...A good one?” (13). His father’s tale of the mythological sixth borough of New York City sticks with Oskar throughout the novel. The story is even replicated in a picture where a portion of New York City was left blank resembling the missing sixth borough that floated away.

Extremely Loud also mixes history with fiction by portraying the story of the aftermath of the September 11th attacks on New York City. Conversely, the novel seldom addresses the terrors of 9/11 but rather focuses on the individual impact of death on Oskar, which is only one specific result of the tragedy. Instead of blurring history and fiction to the same extreme as *Midnight’s Children*, *Extremely Loud* places the historical situation to the side but similarly dwells on the importance of an individual’s story. The novel illuminates the act of writing by incorporating multiple narrators, although Oskar remains the dominant speaker. Foer furthers the importance of Oskar as narrator by incorporating visuals in order to tell the story. A few times Oskar mentions the book he is working on, *Stuff that Happened to Me*, where he collects photographs of things he finds

on the internet or on his journeys. Most of the images readers see in the novel represent what Oskar himself observes; “the photographs are an attempt to show what Oskar sees” (Barbash, n.pag.). On page 96 in *Extremely Loud*, Oskar narrates how he took a picture of the woman’s picture of an elephant, which Foer displays on the page before this one where we first encounter the elephant print. These bits of (in)sight collected by Oskar produce a collage of work that reflects Oskar’s experiences at that time. Foer, like Anderson and Haddon, preserves the usefulness of telling one’s own story, from an individual and biased perspective rather than through an objective omniscient narrator. The importance is what Oskar sees and feels and not the truth of the situation.

Oskar’s story is unique to the triage of novels, however, because Foer further blurs the line between truth and fiction by including fantastical elements. Although not to the same degree as Rushdie’s magical realism, Oskar frequently allows his imagination to seep into his life’s story. As Yorick in the play, Oskar boldly insults the boy who plays Hamlet and smashes the boy’s head with Yorick’s skull. But this act only “would have been great” and was not great, as Oskar recaps, because it did not actually happen (147). Reminiscent of Hamlet, Oskar-as-Yorick withdraws into his imagination and reality begins to become indiscernible. Oskar eventually reveals this event to be a figment of his imagination, but in other situations Oskar fails to clearly demarcate truth from fiction. For instance, Oskar visits some 216 different homes during his search for the owner of the key and takes years to do so. He hears other stories by adults that readers might be skeptical about, like the woman who claims she lives at the top of the Empire State Building, all of which help Oskar realize he cannot live in his grief forever.

In addition to storytelling, Michael Faber sees Oskar's creativity take form in the more specific process of inventing: Oskar "ceaselessly conceives impossible inventions...in a desperate attempt to cope with the grief...of losing his father in the twin towers disaster" (n.pag.). Walter Kirn's review echoes this view of coping by saying that Oskar "compulsively soothes himself by dreaming up whimsical inventions like an electronic sign for ambulances that flashes news of their occupants' conditions" (n.pag.) Analogous to narrating and puzzles, Oskar attempts to create objects that would make the world a better place in order to distract himself from his father's death at a surface level but also to grab a hold of controllable situations through the act of creation. Within these collective inventions Oskar displays himself as both a rational and scientific individual, pursuing the discovery of objects that would be useful to society, and as a creative being subject to fantastical whims and ideas. The tension these inventions contain—scientific use vs. fantastical objects—expose the possibilities and the limitations of both.

CHAPTER THREE

INKBLOTS, CHARTS, AND PHOTOS: USING SIGHT TO CONVEY LOSS

I saw maps and drawings, pictures from magazines and newspapers and the Internet, pictures I'd take with Grandpa's camera. The whole world was in there.

-Oskar, *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*

Puzzles infiltrate the text in multiple ways beyond the detective structure itself. Weaving in and out of several literary genres, a combination of text and visuals, and various voices, the reader must constantly decipher who is speaking and in what way this shift in voice and style works in the larger context of the novel. In combination with the other symbols of relearning—the child and games—the visuals add to the text a sense of mystery the reader must seek to uncover and thus form a full understanding of what is not initially and blatantly demonstrated. While these multiple viewpoints and formats allow the mainly first-person narratives to be more inclusive and revealing beyond any first-person limitations, they also touch on the larger themes of the unspeakable and of loss. By incorporating visual elements into the text, each author returns to the idea of limitations in conventional knowledge. In *Reading Contemporary Picturebooks*, Davis Lewis discusses the possibilities that pictures can bring to a text: “The very presence of pictures appears to loosen generic constraints and open up the text to alternative ways of looking and thinking” (66). By juxtaposing images with words in the novel format the author reveals the limitations inherent in spoken or written language. However, because the pictures are presented without explanation the reader/viewer must then infer possible meaning. Therefore the incorporation of pictures into the novel form displays the

insufficiency of both language and the visual image to fully express a thought, emotion or theme.

Visuals are not absolute signifiers in *Extremely Loud*, *Octavian Nothing*, and *The Curious Incident*, despite their ability to communicate where words fail. While images often do replace the words and emotions the characters cannot properly convey in the novels, the authors twist these visual representations of “reality” to demonstrate that all views are subjective and do not contain verifiable truths. As often as visuals replace text, the visuals fail to communicate with actual representations of the emotion or idea they seek to convey. Through an exploration of these non-conventional literary techniques, specifically the visuals, the novels use sight against itself to convey one of the main themes—loss and absence. Katalin Orban, in her study entitled “Trauma and Visuality,” likewise draws the conclusion that what a reader does not see can mean a significant amount: “Confronting readers with what they see and what they do not draws attention not only to the limitations of images but also the object of loss itself, that which images are unable to show” (63). Sight, by this definition, incorporates much more than what a viewer actually sees but includes what we do not see as well. Furthermore, as Lewis explains in his study of children’s picture books, “One of the reasons why pictorialization—the promiscuous mixing together of words and images—is able to shake loose generic bonds and derail expectations, is that it permits picture book makers to play off one perspective or view against the other” (68). Although both mediums (text and visual) have limitations (which signal absence in and of itself), in the dynamics of text-

image relations, the authors use these barriers of communication to their advantage to construct an analogy for the narrative's emotional barriers.

What is revealing through the use of these visuals sometimes is not what the images show but rather what they purposely omit, what they fail to communicate, and the way they form relationships with the text's portrayal of absences and the textual gaps themselves. Anderson, Haddon, and Foer play with our initial notion of what visuals convey—sight—by allowing some of the images to represent and display the emotional absences that flood the text. Instead of focusing on what we do see, the contemporary authors ask their readers to focus on what they do not see within the image itself. While the child and elements of play form a new way of looking at the visuals and text, more importantly, this relearning serves to expose the reality of traumatic situations, such as death, to the adult audience who is frequently either too numb or too emotional to react positively. In the end, after analyzing layer upon layer, the portrayal of visuals as “nothing” creates a haunting absence of emotion that mirrors the youths' own barriers to emotional communication as well as the inabilities of the adults around him. The visuals of absence are what provide the novels with the necessary links to emotional contact, whether they symbolize the loss of death or the absence of emotional connections and communication.

Wordplay: The Inadequacy of Language

Images serve rhetorical purposes as they double as a means of communication. Everything from the placement of an image to the type of visual medium can be

interpreted for meaning beyond what the image contains visually. Even written text can assume meaning beyond the individual signs they represent. In *Ways of the Illustrator*, Joseph Schwarcz points out, “The surface of the written and the printed word and the visual stimuli hidden there have always fulfilled various functions. Relative sizes, ways of placing and arranging words and sentences on a page, the choice of scripts for special occasions and messages...are habitual means of communication” (65). At the outset, all three novelists utilize text as visuals to destroy traditional ways of looking at written language. Instead of focusing on what the word represents, a reader must also analyze the visual connotations of the written word(s). Now, language alone does not suffice as the sole means of communicating emotions and information. The authors deconstruct language by including the image as a sign to replace, supplement, add to, and/or change language’s meaning.

Exhibiting a hodgepodge of textual techniques, each novel uses at least two different genres of voice—first-person narration and the epistolary form. Letters appear occasionally throughout all three texts, making the novels only semi-autobiographical accounts. While the content of the letters reveals what readers should think and feel about them, their visual form plays a significant role in determining the characteristics to be expected from the letters and their content as well. Common conventions such as openings (Dear ---) and closings (Sincerely Yours) as visual signifiers aid readers in forming expectations for the content and explaining the purpose behind the text. This textual format stands out from the rest of the narrative because of its unique visual style. In their visual form, letters most frequently appear as an attempt to maintain personal

connections between characters. They are exclusive groups of text that serve to speak personally to one individual from another. Readers may even begin to expect personal revelations in letters sent, say, from mother or father to son due to the genre conventions. However, the purpose behind letters themselves is to fill the void of absence. Dialogue would replace letters if the individuals were able to communicate face to face with one another. Even within this genre of letter writing, however, readers must invest in language, as the written word is the only means for communicating from a distance.

For example, the letters Christopher finds are from his supposedly deceased mother. Christopher's autism prevents him from initially discovering the truth behind these letters, because he doesn't lie himself and the event reaches beyond the scope of his experiences. After he realizes what they are and what year they were written Christopher and his readers first feel the pangs of desertion. The letters serve to reestablish a personal connection between mother and child, but their very existence hints at the lack of relationship and communication between the two. Christopher's father even comments on the function of these letters later on in the novel:

And Father shouted, "Wrote to him? What the fuck use is writing to him?"

And Mr. Shears shouted, "Whoa, whoa, whoa."

And Father shouted, "I cooked his meals. I cleaned his clothes. I looked after him every weekend. I looked after him when he was ill...And you? What? You wrote him some fucking letters." (196-97)

While his father belittles his mother's gesture to continue a relationship with Christopher, equating affection with dedication and physical appearance, he does bring about a valid point in terms of the letter genre. His mother's attempt to communicate falls short when compared to her physical absence.

In *Octavian Nothing*, the child tells his own narrative for the majority of the space, but often advertisements or letters written by other individuals interrupt his personal account, specifically when he flees the college and no longer continues his narrative. In a review of the novel, Gillian Engberg realizes the significance in these genre shifts as a visual format, "Anderson employs multiple viewpoints and formats—letters, newspaper clippings, scientific papers—[which] pick up the story that Octavian is periodically unable to tell" (n.pag.). Anderson as mock "editor" incorporates other sundry sources to replace what Octavian's diary lacks. The letters are one of the few instances of emotional communication in the narrative, since Octavian constantly shows partiality towards rational thought, which is even more poignant because they direct reader attention to the fact that these letters are from minor characters writing about Octavian rather than ones addressed to him. Octavian rarely shares in textual moments of human connection because he is both slave and experiment and eventually orphaned. By juxtaposing these letters against Octavian's own diary entries, readers might notice how unemotional Octavian sounds as a child educated in pure reason; or they might notice the lack of love Octavian receives from anyone at the College of Lucidity. Anderson juxtaposes the letters both in form and content with Octavian's own narrative to illuminate the differences between the two emotionally.

Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close also employs letters, and in this case they regularly focus on separation and a loss of connectivity between individuals. Most often, the letters appear most frequently in the parallel narrative to Oskar's search for the key. In this side story, his grandfather and grandmother write letters to other members of the family, which chart their inability to bond with one another and their feelings after the loss of their son. Subsequently in his search for a connection with his deceased father, Oskar attempts to form relationships with other mentor-like figures, some of which develop through letters. Oskar constantly writes to famous people such as Stephen Hawking, Ringo Star, and Jane Goodall. The responses he receives in these letters are usually short and generic or written by assistants to the individuals, not the individual him or herself. The lack of personal connection is obvious in form and content. However, while the letters as objects reflect absence, they do make some attempt to bridge the gap between loved ones. Oskar's difficulties bonding with others is somewhat alleviated by the end of the novel when he finally communicates effectively with his mother, but this change is also foreshadowed through a response from Stephen Hawking directly before this reconnection of family. Stephen Hawking writes:

I've read every letter that you've sent me these past two years. In return, I've sent you many form letters, with the hope of one day being able to give you the proper response you deserve. . . . You won't be awake for another five hours, but I can't help feeling that we're sharing this clear and beautiful morning. (304-5)

Even within this hopeful response, readers know Oskar can never completely reconnect with his father, but it brings a ray of hope that suggests other relationships will still form and create a support system for young Oskar even through adulthood. Likewise, letters written to Christopher and Octavian demonstrate the absence of personal connections but still reveal an attempt to maintain relationships with others. The letters are symbolic of the disconnection people have with one another and the struggle to communicate and fill emotional voids. The boys more overtly struggle to cope with death in a healthy manner, but they equally grapple to maintain relationships among the living.

Secondly, the texts expose language's inadequacy to fully convey ideas and emotion. Even within the letter format, the impression arises that the narrators cannot completely tell their own story. In Octavian's story "the first part of the tale is narrated in the boy's highly educated, rational voice. But after Octavian loses his voice 220 pages into the book, the story continues through letters written by those who knew him" (Horning, n.pag.). His voice alone cannot convey the necessary story. By using multiple viewpoints and genres, Anderson expounds on Octavian's narrative. Although Oskar and Christopher never completely fail to give voice to their story, letters and the multitude of images similarly give additional voice to each boy's tale and explain what they perhaps cannot. For *Extremely Loud*, the parallel plot of Oskar's grandfather to Oskar's own narrative adds depth to the theme of re-connectivity and loss that Oskar may not be able to speak about effectively, although he still manages to say a lot. Oskar narrates non-stop, but often these words expose little. For *The Curious Incident*, the struggle between his parents reveals a tumult that Christopher cannot reveal himself since he has Asperger's

Syndrome and has trouble discerning what emotions are beyond the happy and sad smiley faces his teacher draws for him.

The letters and other documents provide additional information necessary to understand the narrative thematically, but the multiple viewpoints presented especially through the personal format of a letter reveal the subjective nature of thought in general. Despite rational, observatory tones within some of the letters, particularly in *Octavian Nothing*, each implied author views his or her situation differently from the other implied authors. At the very core of the letter format is the varied perspective of personal experience. Each novelist heightens the notion of biased knowledge by allowing the protagonists to write their own story overtly in journalistic fashion and by positioning opposing or diverse viewpoints side by side. These multiple viewpoints are essential when challenging conventional thinking about the definition of truth. According to Brian Richardson in his study of narrative voice entitled, "I Etcetera: On the Poetics and Ideology of Multipersoned Narratives:" "Even where the narrator's speaking situation seems fixed, the proliferation of alternative voices threatens to destabilize that situation" (n.pag.). Each protagonist narrates the majority of his story, but when interwoven voices continuously interrupt his narrative and offer additional opinions, readers see that even the same story is never seen the same way.

Multiple voices and first-person narration via letters and documents open the story up to varied perspectives, but often these correspondences compromise communication itself by disrupting preconceived notions about the ability of language to communicate through the written word. In its simplest form, as Walter Kirn remarks in

his book review of *Extremely Loud*, “The pages that are blank on purpose...teach us that some extremes of pain and loss can be signified only by the text of no text” (n.pag.). Indeed we encounter blank pages and spaces throughout the novel. Three pages are left completely blank signaling the grandfather’s incapability to say the things he needs to tell his son (121-23). When the grandfather does speak in the story, he only communicates with the written word. Yet space surrounds the area around this communication, pointing out the lack of it at the same time. For example, Oskar’s grandfather writes, “I want two rolls” and “Help,” on otherwise blank sheets of paper. The juxtaposition of a page filled with text next to a page with only one sentence or phrase illuminates the grandfather’s inability to speak like the other characters in the novel. At other times, the grandfather tries to write a lot, but when language fails him his words turn into abstract images. In one particular letter, he at one point starts using numbers to symbolize text and at another point places the letters and words so close together they run into each other and run on top of each other.

Octavian and Christopher likewise have moments of intensity when they can no longer focus concretely, and they demonstrate this emotional state through blurred visuals. In *Octavian Nothing*, the boy’s narrative comes to a halt when he can no longer recount his moments in the iron mask. Engberg observes, “Several pages show furious black quill-pen cross-hatchings, through which only a few words are visible, perhaps indicating that even with his scholarly vocabulary, Octavian can’t find words to describe the vast evil that he has witnessed” (n.pag.). Engberg draws a direct comparison between the precocious nature of the child and his limitations when it comes to traumatic events.

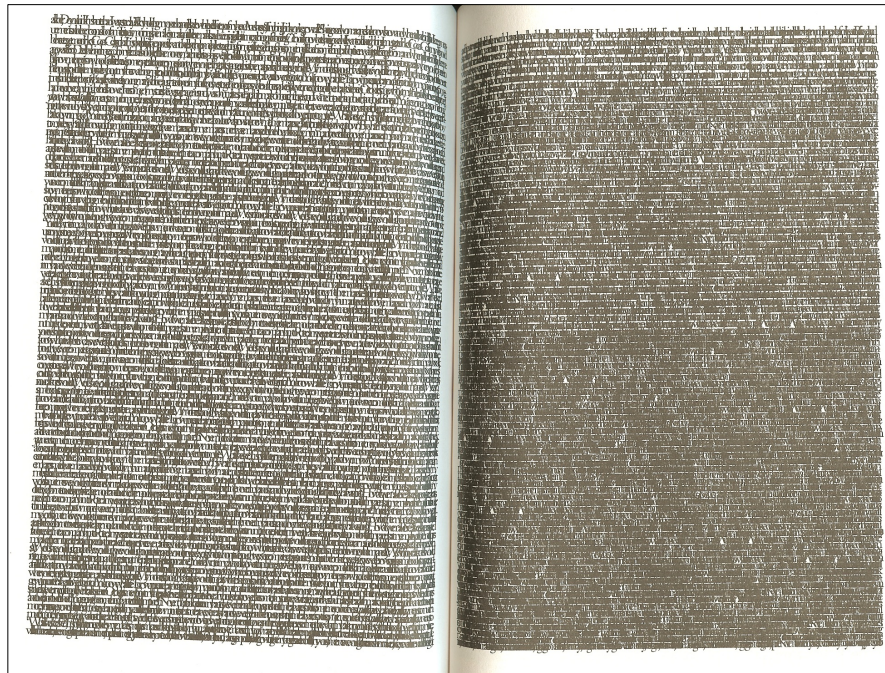


Figure 4.1. Blurring the text (Foer 282-83).

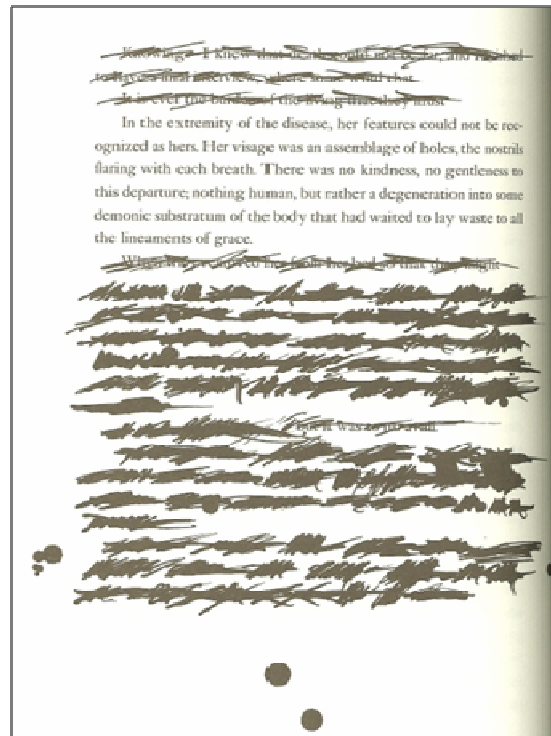
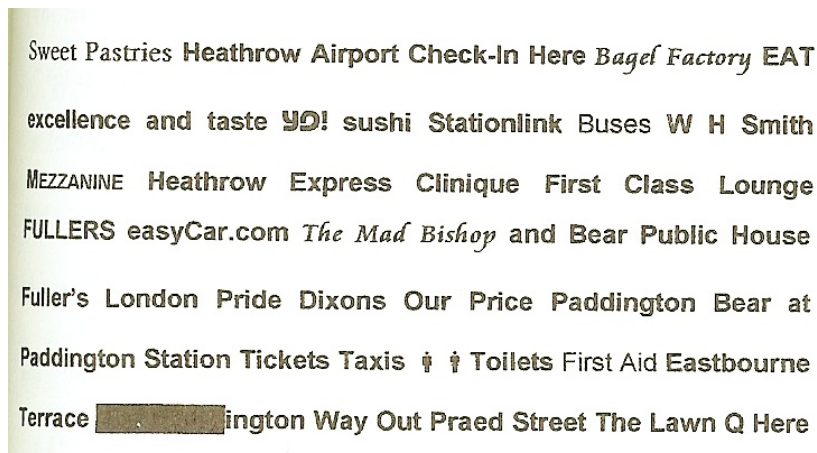


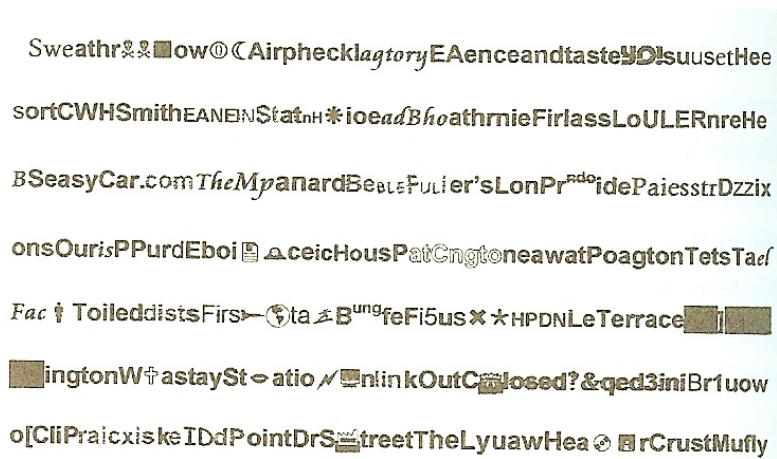
Figure 4.2. Inkblots from Octavian's narrative (Anderson 222).

While Christopher does not have quite the same problems with language as Oskar's grandfather and Octavian, he still has difficulties absorbing and interpreting information in frightening situations. Never having traveled alone, Christopher recalls his state of mind when he first enters the train station in London:

I groaned to block out the noise and I looked around the room at all the signs to see if this was London. And the signs said



But after a few seconds they looked like this. (169-70)²



² In order to reproduce the text as accurately as possible, I have chosen to incorporate these visual images as a block quote.

More importantly, however, Christopher uses a replica of the signs in the form of a separate image to stand in for language to demonstrate more fully his confused state. Unable to fully describe his jumbled and confused thoughts, Christopher resorts to showing his audience what he saw replicated in his mind.

Another way *Extremely Loud* shows its preference for alternative methods of communication is through the employment of colors. The novel uses only two instances of color, but interestingly enough, these are smaller occurrences. Foer chooses to leave the major images, photographs, in black and white, which further illuminates any significance when he does on occasion use color. The first occurrence of color happens with the red pen. Red marks serve as indicators of mistakes. Oskar recalls how his father frequently uses a red pen to indicate mistakes in the *New York Times*. However, with the image-text relationship, readers know of a secondary use of the red marks. Early in the novel, Oskar's father circles an unusual phrase—unusual because it does not contain any mistakes. Oskar proclaims, “It wasn’t a mistake! It was a message to me!” (10). Hence, later on when we come across another set of red marks, we are aware of the double meaning. If a red circle does not point out an error, then it is most likely a message or clue for both the implied reader and the actual reader to decipher.

The red pen has a minor recurring role throughout the novel, but none more central to visually displaying emotion than the mark of no mistakes. After the initial occurrence in the *New York Times*, the red marks appear again in another context, in a letter written by the grandfather. The grandfather, Thomas Schell Sr., begins writing letters to his son soon after he leaves his son and wife. The letters themselves suggest an

media center off the back of the family home, Levy's father adamantly restated his confidence that his daughter would be found. "We will not stop looking until we are given a definitive reason to stop looking, namely, Chandra's return." During the brief question and answer period that followed, a reporter from El Pais asked Mr. Levy if by "return" he meant "safe return." Overcome with emotion, Mr. Levy was unable to speak, and his lawyer took the microphone. "We continue to hope and pray for Chandra's safety, and will do everything within

Figure 4.3. Red marks and hunting for clues in the *New York Times* (Foer 10).

absence from the family that the grandfather tries to fill with words, but the absence of errors, despite the frenzy of red circles within the letter, heightens the emotional rift between father and son more than the genre of writing. Looking at what someone (presumably Oskar or the grandfather since the father passes away before he has the chance to read the letters) has circled in red, a reader may recognize the few mistakes that are actually circled as relevant but may also find a coded message in the use of red marks when there are no apparent grammatical errors. Since the letters and phrases "someone" circles seem incoherent, we must figure out another reason for the existence of the marks. Readers can sense the frenzy created by an increase in sloppy marks toward the end, allowing the emotional disturbance the implied author of the letter feels to shine through. The maker of the marks is upset by what the letter says. Language still conveys emotion, but without the addition of visuals, the feelings would not be as stark. The red pen marks

also work to expose the emotion the implied reader feels, which the audience would otherwise be unable to see. Even the color choice of red adds to the mood the text and circles convey. Our culture has used red as a symbol for passion, whether in death or in love. The corrector no longer chooses to be selective by the end of the written letter. He circles every phrase that affects him personally. Readers must notice the absence of mistakes before they can discover the frenzied, emotional state of the implied reader—the one making all of the red marks.

**Pictures, Pictures and Even More Pictures:
But What Do They Mean (Or Rather Fail to Show)?**

Using visuals to communicate accentuates the inability to effectively convey emotion through language. If the written word fails to describe and elicit emotion, the reader must turn elsewhere in the novel to find it. A work about the individual's response to trauma begs an emotional reading. In Perry Nodelman's *Words About Pictures*, he finds a replacement for the written word in the form of pictures. He concludes, "The emotional quality of what is asserted must be conveyed by the pictures, which then inform those who look at them about the tone of voice in which to read the words—the attitude to take toward them" (42). Although readers can turn to visuals to help them in the search for textual meaning, the images often pose their own problem as well. When viewers turn to the pictures in the novels, the images do not always possess the potential to inspire emotional responses at first. However, by approaching the illustrations in an alternative manner, they invite a new reading.

The types of images found throughout the novels vary from story to story, but as a whole, the different styles of visuals all initially serve to represent ideas of objective truth. Rather than using more manipulative and abstract media, such as illustrations which commonly appear in literature with visuals, each author attempts to include visual signs that are closer to the actual thing they represent. Foer's use of photographs initially suggests a parallel to reality, Anderson's inclusion of historical documents hint at the validity of the novel as an actual slave narrative, and Haddon's solvable equations and charts adhere to mathematical accuracy. The quilt work of visual media introduces notions of authenticity, but by deconstructing the absolute nature of these images as portraits of reality and truth, the authors further the manipulation of these signs (similar to the construction of puzzles) and ultimately distort the value invested in representations of reality. Although some of these types of images are exclusive to a specific novel, they often produce the same effect in all three novels.

The Astonishing Life of Octavian Nothing, as a mock 18th century novel, has fewer visual components than the other books I treat in this study, but the types of images it contains often supports the same pretense of factual truth as the images do in the other two novels. Since the novel is a supposed product of the pre-American revolutionary period, M. T. Anderson must adhere to conventions of the time, which readers can easily see through the language and vocabulary of the text. Within the first page, we encounter the narrator saying, "How doth all that seeks to rise burn itself to nothing" (3). However, for the very reason that Anderson chooses to keep up the façade of the novel as a historical piece, he is able to use visuals subtly against their initial purpose. *Octavian*

Nothing as a work of historical fiction cannot fully escape its own fictionality, but rather than seeing this as a gap in the narrative, Anderson uses it to convey his ultimate message.

Octavian Nothing is certainly unique among neo-slave and antebellum slave narratives alike because it addresses issues of slavery before the colonies even established the United States as a separate country, free to rule itself. Anderson gives voice to an era and a people who were initially denied a voice. The fact that the story is fictional is equally as important as knowing the issues within the fiction are real. The torn edges of the novel, representing cut pages before contemporary techniques of mass publishing, and Anderson's persistent portrayal of himself as a mere collector or editor of the diary entries and documents supposedly establishes this as an actual historical narrative.

Octavian Nothing's visual presentation and internal documents hint at the role storytelling plays in discerning important information. Beyond the physical appearance of the book, readers may find their initial impression (that the book is a historical document) to be false, but what is more important is the idea behind this charade. The value of the novel is not hinged on the historical accuracy of the novel, but rather the meaning it communicates. Furthermore, because the novel cannot be judged by its cover (a fictional novel disguised as a historical narrative), readers may learn that appearance can often be deceptive. Readers need to remember or learn how to question concepts, whether they appear factual or not. Reason can help individuals move toward an informed understanding but can often be a complicated journey or can produce limited answers. As

both neo and antebellum slave narrative, the novel transcends the boundaries of linear time, while remaining relevant to both periods in history.

While the historical documents filling the pages of *Octavian Nothing* mainly serve to illuminate the historical perspective on which the novel centers, some of these digressions from Octavian's narrative also serve as scientific documents. These furthermore illuminate the limitations of scientific thinking, throwing even its factual ideas into subjective personal lenses. Particularly, the chart Octavian sees with a list of "mammalian" printed upon it exposes that even science can be distorted through a human—and therefore imperfect—gaze. While Octavian notes after viewing this chart and some books that "there was nothing, thus far, to affright" (46), modern readers would surely note the descriptions of each type of human. Europeans are simply labeled "Europeans" while the chart refers to the other categories of Homo-sapiens using language such as "wild men" and "African and American savages" (45). Readers know, even if only through the example of the novel, the problems attributed to these terms today. Octavian and his mother, for example, do not fit the definition of "savage" that the Novanglians have assigned to all humans of African descent. For example, even without the College of Lucidity's training, Octavian's mother has musical training—both instrumental and vocal—from her motherland. She even protects her music from misuse by retaining it for herself and refusing to share it with the members of the college.

Furthermore, readers encounter a scientific article by Mr. Gitney and Sharpe that reveal huge discrepancies between Octavian's account of his mother's death and the documentation by the members of the college. In this account, the men also use

Octavian’s defiance of their actions to support a negative portrayal of his race: “We cite this vignette as an example of possible recidivism; it demonstrates not only the confusion but also the fractious and insubordinate natural inclination of the African subject” (230). The narrative further reflects a distrust of supposed scientific facts when Mr. Sharpe takes over the college and alters the education of Octavian to prove that people of African descent are less intelligent than those of European descent. The text, including visual documents, forces readers to question the types of information these accounts present.

I. PRIMATES	
MAN.	<i>HOMO.</i>
Sapient Man.	1. Homo Sapiens.
a. Wild Men.	a. Homo Feri.
b. American savages.	b. Homo Americani.
c. Europeans.	c. Homo Europæi.
d. Asiatics.	d. Homo Asiatici.
e. African savages.	e. Homo Afri.
f. Monsters.	f. Homo Monstrosi.
1. Dwarfish.	1. Alpini.
2. Gigantic.	2. Patagonici.
3. Mutilated.	3. Monorchides.
4. Beardless.	4. Imberbes.
5. Sharp-headed.	5. Macrocephali.
6. Flat-headed.	6. Plagiocephali.
HOMO SAPIENS— <i>KNOW THYSELF</i>	

Figure 4.4. The chart of primates hanging on the College of Lucidity’s wall (Anderson 45).

Christopher's narrative likewise uses concrete mathematical and scientific resources to tell his tale, and Haddon similarly questions the absolute nature of factual evidence when human individuals are concerned. Mark Haddon stays true to Christopher's autistic inclinations in incorporating visuals into the text. Since Christopher is a rational and mathematical thinker, the images—graphs, charts, maps, formulas, and signs—Haddon introduces largely parallel this preference. If readers think about these types of media as puzzles (sets of clues that link to one definite solution), the visuals help to establish Christopher's logical identity and support the constant problem solving that Christopher and readers perform throughout the novel. He employs these types of images regularly to aid him in explaining complicated problems to his audience. The visuals initially support notions of logical thinking and problem solving, but arguably, taken in the larger context of the novel, Haddon uses these logical contraptions to demonstrate that people need a balance between order and disorder, fact and fiction, and ultimately people need a balance between reason and emotion. Readers see this need through Christopher's initial emotionless composure, his visual mappings of his world, and through the juxtaposition of the adult realm where emotions tend to run high.

The constant exposure to mathematical formulas and charts requires little emotional investment on the part of Christopher and his readers. These visual proofs, such as when Christopher explains The Monty Hall Problem, reveal solutions people might not initially discern through other forms of thinking, particularly intuition in this case. However, these visual aids generally encourage no emotional response from readers. They are useful and explanatory but do not at first seem to go beyond a

utilitarian role, taken as a whole. Christopher meticulously journals his own experiences and maps his own journey (often literally through visual maps) yet cannot often record his own feelings. Even when Christopher does manage to express himself through the small black and white images he inserts into the text, they are either the image of a simple smiling face or a frowning face. He mentions that he cannot discern the complex facial expressions of other people. He recalls, “Then [my teacher] drew some other pictures but I was unable to say what these meant” (3):



Figure 4.5. Understanding complex emotions through icons (Haddon 3).

The logical mapping, on the surface, seems to illuminate the pros of living without emotional chaos and shows partiality toward reasoned thinking. In fact, readers can view the absence of emotion as a positive occurrence when Haddon juxtaposes Christopher’s personality and actions against those of the adults in the novel. In his review of the novel, Jay McInerney comments on how readers may react to the binary types of characters: “We begin to question the common sense and the erratic emotionalism of the normal citizens who surround him [Christopher], as well as our own intuitions and habits of perception” (n.pag.). Christopher’s actions and thoughts certainly cause his audience to think twice about their own conduct. The strategic placement of the rational Christopher next to the erratic adults (specifically his parents) encourages readers to emphasize more with Christopher than with the adult characters.

However, in a novel in which the plot centers on traumatic events, such as death and broken relationships, the seemingly emotional abyss conflicts with readers' perceptions of these events. Nodelman explains the purpose of images in a text but distinguishes the frequent difference between longer novels and picture books. He finds:

Picture books emphasize showing as much as telling, and their pictures often fill in the details of emotion and of setting that their words leave out and that color seems most suited to convey. But in longer books, words can convey at least some of those details, and pictures in color seem superfluous when they merely duplicate information the text itself communicates. (69)

Taking Nodelman's observation into consideration while reading *The Curious Incident*, readers may find the images neither "fill in the details of emotion," like the picture book, nor do they merely duplicate information the author presents. What purpose do these images serve, then, if they do not heighten the emotional discourse of the novel?

The author juxtaposes the emotionless images next to the tragic circumstances, which inevitably generate tension between the two opposing ideas. What we do not see—emotion—becomes more striking than what we do see. As adults who are susceptible to love and pain ourselves (mirrored in the deeds of Christopher's parents) readers of *The Curious Incident* see the limitations of Christopher's behavior, which the author illuminates with the inclusion of charts and equations. In this novel, the images in conjunction with the text upset common ways of thinking and interpreting visuals as rhetorical elements that foster an emotional response. Rather than seeing images of the

tumultuous events surrounding Christopher, his readers instead notice the absence of their own feelings about his situation. While on the surface we praise the way Christopher handles traumatic situations, we can likewise identify and sympathize with the unreasonable adults around him.

Readers may find Christopher's absence of emotion striking yet unfulfilling. However, although the images might initially propose a dispassionate reading of the novel, emotions still thrive. For example, Christopher must still rely on the emotions of the adults to help him survive in a world where clues cannot solve all of the problems life presents. He relies on the care strangers give him (for example when a stranger saves him from moving trains), and he relies on his parents' attachment to and love of him for support, which helps him succeed academically and psychologically. But these adults help Christopher as much as they harm him emotionally because of the erratic nature of their interaction with him, and because Christopher himself is not a completely mechanical and unfeeling individual, he requires these support systems for his own desires and needs. Although he may convince himself that life would be better if he had little to no human interaction and everyone were more like him, his actions negate this view. Christopher describes a recurring dream he has in which the only other people left on earth are like him: "And they like being on their own and I hardly ever see them. . . . And I can go anywhere in the world and I know that no one is going to talk to me or touch me or ask me a question" (199). However, when he needs to leave home after he has a fight with his father he seeks a place of shelter from people he knows and trusts, rather than forging the world alone. Christopher also recounts other dreams, daydreams,

in which he reveals a wish to get married and have children. Despite his supposed apathy toward human connections, Christopher does have a basic human need for personal relationships and love. On the surface, these indicators of Christopher's emotions do not stand out, but even after a closer look at the images themselves, readers can see a need for and a visible display of emotional concerns.

Christopher does use these images to convey emotions which he has difficulty feeling deeply and communicating to others, despite the appearance of the images at the outset. While outwardly they are simple and factual, underneath their exterior, the visuals reveal human emotional concerns. Although a simplistic response, Christopher notes that he feels like the frowning face when he finds the dead dog and later feels like the smiling face because he receives an A on his math A level exams. He literally shows his audience how he feels visually by inserting these facial expressions into the text. While Christopher never exhibits much emotion he feels throughout the novel, the very appearance of any feelings supports the idea that Christopher is not a wholly rational being, despite his own conviction that "logic can help you" (65). Even through unsentimental images, the frustration Christopher feels about being different is exposed. He provides his audience with an example of a field of cows: "And it means that it is very tiring if I am in a new place because I see all these things, and if someone asked me afterward what the cows looked like, I could ask which one, and I could do a drawing of them at home and say that a particular cow had patterns on it like this" (142). While others see a beautiful day or a field full of cows, Christopher meticulously counts cows and spots and all of the other objects in the field. Nani Power points out an underlying

theme in the book: “Because emotions are subjective, who can presume to say whether someone else can feel one—or even what an emotion is?” (n.pag.). Christopher constantly challenges his audience’s views on what emotions are and how one should convey these emotions. As a whole, the images display a void of emotion as we would typically feel and exhibit, but readers must remember that Christopher does not think or feel quite like us. Closer up, some of the individual visuals actually help support the idea of Christopher as a sentimental individual, only in his own unique way. He simply cares in different ways. He is superstitious and particular in his likes and dislikes, and most of all, Christopher has fears.

Jonathan Safran Foer incorporates images more heavily in this novel than either Mark Haddon or M. T. Anderson, although visuals play a vital role in each. Aside from multiple styles such as letters and blurred or jumbled words, the other visual medium dominating *Extremely Loud* is the photograph. People take photographs most often when they want to preserve a moment in time, because a photo is able to parallel reality so closely. Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright comment on the myth of photographic truth in their book *Practices of Looking*: “The aura of machine *objectivity* clings to mechanical and electronic images. . . . A photograph is often perceived to be an unmediated copy of the real world, a trace of reality skimmed off the very surface of life” (16-17). Aside from the written and verbal word, photographs dominate journalistic communication as a secondary means of conveying information for this very reason. A strictly created, therefore instantly manipulated, image does not have the same ability to feign reality as a photograph seems to hold for its audience. Manipulation suggests fiction, while a closer

representation of reality communicates “truth.” However, “the creation of an image through a camera lens always involves some degree of subjective choice through selection, framing, and personalization” (Sturken and Cartwright 16). Although the photographic image does rely on framing and positioning, which alter viewer perception, they still give the initial impression of unmediated reality and truth. Images in general hold a unique position among other signs because they are often supposed to represent the thing they stand in for as closely as possible, and no other single type of fixed image can do this better than a photo.

However, photos can never replace the real notion they attempt to represent. John Berger, in his book *Ways of Seeing*, famously defined an image as “a sight which has been recreated or reproduced. It is an appearance, or a set of appearances, which has been detached from the place and time in which it first made its appearance and preserved—for a few moments or a few centuries” (9-10). This is especially true in the case of a photograph. Although a photograph, unlike most other visual media, has the means to express “truth” through a documentary lens, photos will always be images detached from the original scene. While we can see a near perfect recreation of a portion of history in the September 11 photos in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, these images cannot convey the same emotional trauma that the initial impact had on the human psyche. The pictures still invoke emotions, but at the same time they remind readers that these memory stimulations are merely a bridge of emotional communication that can never fully represent the situation at hand; a space between the two still exists. The truth a picture suggests will always contain gaps and voids of meaning, regardless of its

proximity to the object under scrutiny. Despite the ability of the visual medium to get incredibly close to the real scene it serves to represent, Foer draws attention to its distance from reality by altering the images and placing them in relative obscurity, and this is the very same distance that plagues the main characters.

The photographic images in the book represent what Oskar sees. Several clues draw attention to the authorship of the photographs. One such example is Oskar's mention of his book, *Stuff That Happened to Me*. This photo-journal contains images ranging from Oskar's own personal experiences to information he researches on the Internet. Oskar never blatantly tells his audience the novel they hold in their hands is this very same photo-journal, but readers can tell that the majority of the photographs are what Oskar experiences. The photo of the elephant, for example, directly correlates with the narrative discourse. Oskar asks the first Mrs. Black if he can take a picture of her photograph of an elephant, which looks like it is crying. Here Foer introduces us to Oskar's way of seeing and to his emotional difficulties, but by looking at the image in relation to the text, what we see and do not see is what furthers our sight and knowledge of Oskar's emotional obstacles.

Oskar never provides his readers with a personal look at emotions in pictures. The few images of people he chooses to include often do not have visible faces—the face being the site of extensive body language. Oskar takes a picture of the first Mrs. Black he encounters, but the picture is of the back of her head. When readers do finally encounter an image that is pictorially displaying emotion, they discover it is not a human but rather an elephant. When the first Mrs. Black he encounters remarks how the elephant appears

to be crying, Oskar, in a rare instance of image-text symmetry, retorts logically, “Only humans can cry tears” (96). While he assigns humans the sole capability of feeling and expressing emotions, he fails to demonstrate this same human potential. The only emotion—sadness—readers see from the various images comes from a being incapable of feeling. Here, sight works against itself by proposing a false pretense of emotion.

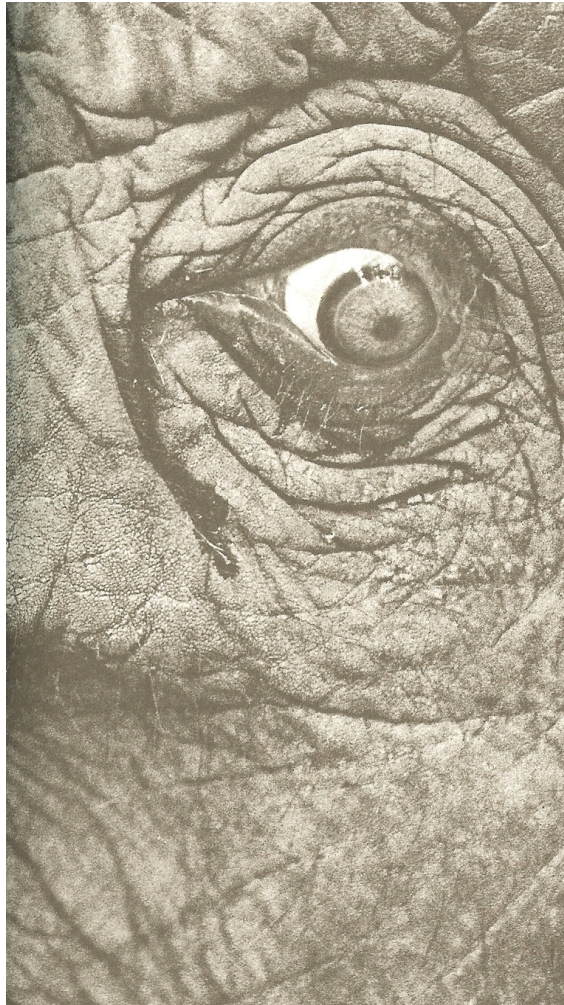
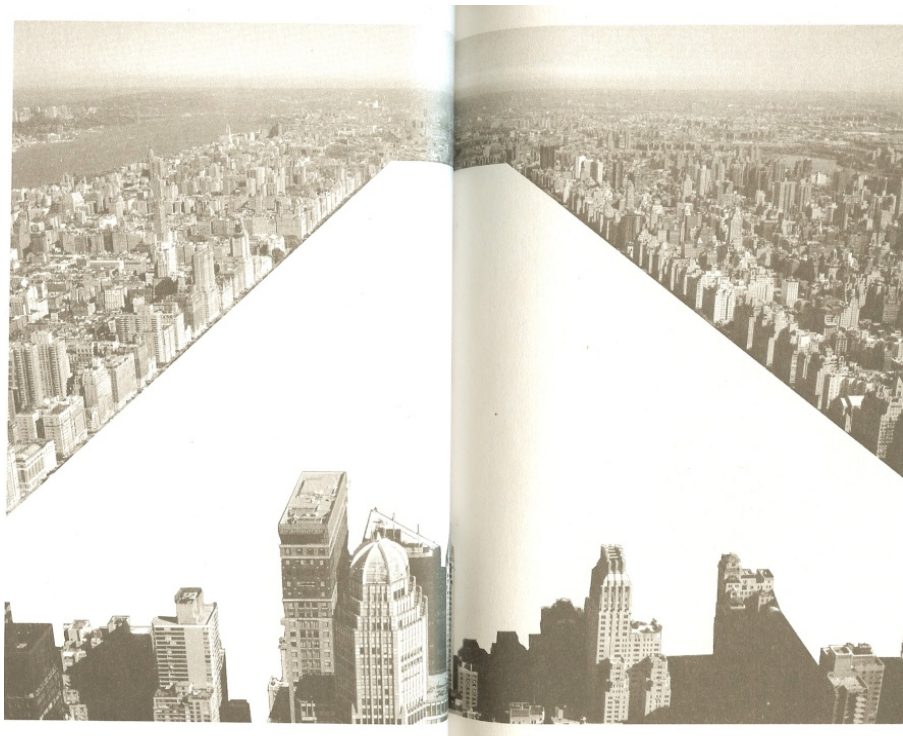


Figure 4.5. Photograph of an elephant “crying” (Foer 95).

Oskar provides his readers with a more obvious instance of loss when he chooses to include monuments in his journalistic pursuit. Monuments are erected specifically to commemorate instances of loss, most often human loss in war or tragedy. Two such images symbolically represent the Twin Towers, thus creating a memorial in its absence. One example of monuments in the novel comes from a picture depicting two lights shining from the ground as Oskar overlooks the Empire State Building (253). The lights are reminiscent of an actual monument constructed after the September 11th events called A Tribute in Lights. The very fact that the lights are non-tangible and only symbolize the towers in their vertical positions exposes the absence and loss of lives from the attacks. The searchlights erected for the monument also play on their original use as instruments for sight. Searchlights generally look for something, but ironically, these lights will never find what they seem to be looking for in this case; the lives are lost forever. Foer also uses another form of blank space to give the illusion of a monument simulating two towers. One of the only double-page spreads of a picture appears in the midst of several single-page images. A photo of New York City leaves a haunting absence of both Central Park, which is what is really missing from the photo, and what the gutter of the novel alludes to—the World Trade Towers (60-61). The removal of Central Park from the image speaks of the huge loss New York has felt. However, it is not Central Park that they have lost but the Towers. Since this image sits on a two-page spread, the crease of the book falls directly in the middle of the white void. Instead of only missing Central Park, we see two vertical columns of emptiness, representing a bright shadow of no towers.



Figures 4.6 and 4.7. A Tribute in Light and a missing Central Park (Foer).

Ironically the story's dialogues initially contradict the idea that these images represent monuments to the towers. The text concludes that these are both images from fantastical stories Oskar has heard. Central Park is missing, according to his father in one bedtime tale called the Sixth Borough, because the land drifted apart from the rest of New York City. The lights are a beacon for a woman who now stands on top of the Empire State Building as she looks out for her lover who wheels searchlights around so that she will be able to see him wherever he might be at night. Underneath these monuments are the remembrances of lost life; both their appearances as memorials and the seemingly unrelated stories contribute to the notion of absence. Because of her grief for her deceased lover, the woman on the top of the Empire State Building refuses to get on with her life and leave. The missing Central Park photograph evokes the story Oskar's father once told him and the memory of his father's absence as well. Although the tragic loss of the buildings is the actual sight of absence, their appearance in the narrative reminds us of Oskar's own experiences with loss but also of how his attempts to deal with the grief are leaving him with more holes. Only when readers take a step back from the supposed image-text symmetry can they see the larger picture. In a novel that uses 9/11 as its backdrop, the images have double meanings: one from an extremely up close view and the other from far away.

These images, and many others throughout the book, never fully connect with the initial narrative of the text. The image-text relationship proves to be one of the many large gaps readers must attempt to fill. Although the photographs at the outset emerge as images from mini-tales or brief references, some of them contradict the suggested stories

of the text if they are taken out of context, or rather if readers place them in a different textual framework. The novel heightens this problem of image-text symmetry by placing several images at a distance from the textual references (if any are present). Lewis explains why this poses a problem when a reader interprets the image-text relationship:

For this interweaving to proceed, however, we need to have the images and the words displayed before us in fairly close proximity to each other. It is not much use if the two strands—the weft and the warp, so to speak—are on different pages or are so far apart that they cannot be brought together in the act of reading. If the words are on one set of pages and the pictures elsewhere in the book, as is frequently the case in longer texts and illustrated novels, then it becomes difficult for the two forms of representation to enter into the construction of the story together. (33)

Since Lewis' study of picture books remains strictly at this level, he never explains what happens when an adult reader must encounter pictures spaced out in a text, but his statement does present a problem for the novel genre's inclusion of pictures. Thus through his theory he suggests that a removed look at the images in this novel reveals more meaning than an up close look since the text and images cannot work together to construct a story from such a distance. The words and visuals are not close enough to analyze together until the reader digests the whole novel. Similarly, readers must view the documents or formulas in *Octavian Nothing* and *The Curious Incident* as a whole to fully perceive the complicated portrayal of reason and logic in the face of tragedy. Readers need to view the images both individually and as a collective group just as we

would read individual words and sentences to construct smaller ideas and build upon these to arrive at a final conclusion for the novel.

Seeing Clearly through Chaos

Another initial problem the collective and individual nature of the images creates is distraction, which plagues all three works of fiction. Distraction appears on multiple levels for the audience in *Extremely Loud*: Oskar's nonsensical speech, the surplus of voices, and the multitude of both written and visual genres. Greenwell observes in *The Curious Incident* that "the pictures, the equations, the digressions, the inclusion of letters, the candid asides, the typography—everything keeps the reader busy" (281). The same hodgepodge technique of mixed genres that forms puzzles for readers likewise distracts them from the text and subject matter at hand. Various critics differ on the topic of distraction in these tales from offering up praise and claims of originality to criticizing the authors for putting on an elaborate show without actually contributing any meaning through the jumble of visual and textual genres. But in novels where relearning is key and the authors turn all traditional conventions on their heads, the chaotic representation of these visuals and text may create a better understanding of the narrative themes and help to create a mood where the narrative voice sometimes fails.

Ironically, Mark Haddon uses the digressions to create order for Christopher, although his readers feel the opposite effect—chaos. Readers may be distracted and often confused, especially since Christopher often reveals through these digressions of equations that he knows more than his adult audience. The pastiche technique promises

chaos while Christopher maintains a calm exterior and actually thrives on the recurrent and challenging problems. “Some of Christopher’s digressions are simple entertainments in themselves, like the mathematical puzzles he uses to stave off sensations of pressures” (Greenwell 281). The constant problem solving maintains order for Christopher, as does the logical process of detective fiction, whether in the form of a visual or textual genre. Again, Christopher’s narrative forces readers to think differently, exposing their own limitations of knowledge and often hyperemotional actions and thoughts when compared to Christopher’s. He does not react to heartbreaking experiences like we think we might, but nonetheless, the very fact that Christopher must continuously distract himself from the world around him by solving equations hints at his own internal struggle to find peace in otherwise chaotic situations.

One of the reoccurring critiques of Foer’s novel is that he bombards readers with images, multiple voices, and nonsensical dialogue. In his review for *The San Francisco Chronicle* Tom Barbash comments, “Until this point, this sort of seeing is blocked by a manic flood of cultural and historical associations...It’s as though both the book and Oskar need to move out from under the noisiness of his idiosyncrasies. In his effort to make Oskar unique, Foer flattens him into a two-dimensional curiosity” (n.pag.). In *The Guardian*, Michael Faber singles out Foer’s use of images in particular, stating, “[The novel] is a triumph of evasion, enhanced with dozens of otiose photographs, rainbow colours and typographical devises, whose net effect is to distract the reader (and Foer) from harsh truths” (n.pag.). And lastly, Kim Walter from *The New York Times* chimes in by accusing Foer of taking “on the most explosive subject available while showing no

passion, giving no offense, adopting no point of view and venturing no sentiment more hazardous than that history is sad and brutal,” particularly due to Oskar’s inability to speak about his emotions in a visible manner (n.pag.). Instead he distracts himself with inventions and quests. These reviewers condemn Foer for an inability to tell the real story behind 9/11 and for evading Oskar’s emotional trauma in a 3-dimensional way. Foer’s techniques of distraction seem have a use in the end, especially within the subject matter that haunts the background of the story—the September 11 terrorist attacks on New York.

The collage of photos, if taken collectively, are all images taken in journalistic pursuit. Some of these images in the novel are even photographs of 9/11-related incidents, which make obvious connections to the media. These glimpses of media images mirror the history of the attacks, even if they are not an illustration of the event itself. All of the photos parallel the media event connected to the attacks by saturating and bombarding the eyes of the viewer, as the reviewers criticize Foer for doing. One particular photograph captures the media in its most aggressive form—a television news program. Although the picture of a television screen is not a 9/11 image, the CNN news cast of the Staten Island Ferry crash seems to blatantly introduce the media’s role in creating a collective memory for individuals who have not personally experienced the event (241). It is also suggestive of loss itself. The media most often plays its most shocking and traumatic images (death, violence, and scandal) first and for the longest to gain more audience interest. Since the image stands alone, it is easier to focus on individually, but if we look at the photograph in connection with the other media-like images, they tell us a story all their own.

In addition to the subversive meaning of the medium, Foer alters the context of the photographs to further the saturated effect media produces. The first example is found in the heaviest section of pictures where he juxtaposes several images next to each other. Over the span of fifteen pages, the reader/viewer encounters fourteen images. This bombardment works in two different ways that come to parallel conclusions. Taken together, the majority of the pictures convey images of everyday life and of information. No one image is really connected to another, and as a whole, they represent a flash of information throw into the reader's face. Again, Oskar takes these photos and keeps them as a journal of *Stuff That Happened to Me*. These are images Oskar rips from the headlines and from the Internet. Among this strand of photos, a few particularly deal with the harsh reality of 9/11 and death; this would bring about an emotional response for a viewer if it stood alone. But as Perry Nodelman reminds us, pictures within a larger narrative structure cannot stand alone. Their relationship to the other images and to the text is interwoven and we must view the images as a whole:

Indeed, because no single picture in a picture book is complete, most such pictures actually violate the usual principles of unified visual composition. Their purpose is to show just one part of a continuing action, a movement of tension and imbalance; and pictures can most successfully convey such information by diverging from conventionally balanced visual patterns in such a way that they attract attention to their most obviously imbalanced parts. (Nodelman 126)

Hence, readers must look at the images that make up the novel as a whole after they have looked at each individual picture. The tension between images and between images and text often creates more meaning than does the illustration as a standalone work of art.

The clash of pictures makes up Oskar's collective memory even if he does not personally experience the events; again, the picture as an artifact of memory entreats the onlooker to view them collectively. As we can see from the Staten Island Ferry incident, Oskar is deeply affected by the media to the degree that he has trouble adhering to his normal routine. He does not ride the ferry or cross bridges in fear they will crash or break. His child persona allows him to feel these emotions, but like the adults around him, he has difficulties expressing them. But childhood state also creates a barrier from inexperience that bars him from effectively expressing himself as well. Another barrier thrown upon Oskar is the large amount of information flung at him. The collection of images emulates the video techniques of the media of displaying image after image and throwing out truths and information. Pushed all together, the close-up image of a man falling from a tower in the midst of turtles mating and a tennis hero celebrating victory means little in its original context of tragedy.

Another reader might be conscious enough to focus on each visual to gain all of the information the image is capable of conveying. If so, the emotions would run wild. Viewers would see an image of Stephen Hawking who might inspire adoration or inspiration in their eyes, but then immediately feel Hamlet's characteristic sadness and indecisiveness when they turn to his image on the mirror page. The two images of men send completely different messages when a reader considers the intertextuality they

present. With the wide range of emotional pleas coming forth from the images, a reader might end the series feeling emotionally exhausted and confused. In both of these manners of image-text weaving, the viewer feels either hyper emotional or void of emotion, both of which the author represents textually in the narrative. Oskar is hyper-emotional, yet this extreme case causes him to form barriers and to stop communicating these emotions. His grandfather refuses to communicate because of his emotional trauma. This causes a break in the communication formula between speaker and listener.

A second example of how Foer manipulates the images by placing them in particular sequences is found on the last pages of the novel, which shock readers as they re-experience the original event. When Oskar merely imagines happier circumstances—where a man could fall up one of the Twin Towers instead of down—Foer turns disaster into something almost fantastical. By reshaping the way we would normally process this visual image, Foer draws attention to the use of framing and placement. By repeating the visual, for example, we come to a different conclusion than the photographer originally intended viewers to draw. Similarly, the photographs and videos from September 11th saturated the media until they took on meanings removed from their original intention.

The excessive amount of images and the comical portrayals in the novel parallel the choices of the media. In the novels, the characters act numb towards the emotional turbulence surrounding them, while we at home fail to react after awhile as well. The feelings are still there, but the way of seeing is blinded by distraction. In *The Picture Book Comes of Age*, Joseph and Chava Schwarcz find that picture books can serve as remedies for the media's distant look at tragedies: "On the lowest level there exists the

callousness (by now proverbial) inherent in the constant media news barrage—wounded soldiers and burning houses, at dinnertime—which habituates all of us to a minimalization of emotional and cognitive reactions...thus” some picture books “may turn out to be among the more important agents of society’s attempt to scale down the abomination of war to a personal level” (167). Foer certainly uses images to promote an individual look at the grief associated with the attacks, rather than investigating the attacks themselves, but since none of these visuals are on a personal level, they recall a collective memory in which the media plays a large role. His contradictions open up the text for a rereading. Instead of using pictures to evoke emotions immediately, his techniques create emotion through the absence of visual and textual emotions. For example, the images from 9/11 that once incited rage and grief from spectators are now so common that it is difficult to incite emotion from the visuals. Oskar, likewise, is in such a state of hyper emotion that he fails to communicate any of these very same feelings. In this situation, a multitude of images damages sight and leaves us empty after viewing.

The saddest part of this novel is the absence of any real show of emotion. In an attempt to discuss the issue of trauma linked to September 11, Foer often chooses not to communicate much at all. By the end of the novel, Oskar is still in “heavy boots,” but the image-text novel does not provide us with adequate resources to see or feel what Oskar sees or feels. Tom Barbash’s critique, “We don’t see much through Oskar’s eyes. We hear his ruminations—but for too long we don’t see, or feel or hear” (n.pag.), certainly hits a chord, yet we might find that the absence of emotional communication is ultimately

more heartbreaking than an emotionally charged text. What we do not see or read affects our senses and makes blatant what we cannot feel from the character's own emotional communication. When the illustrations of *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* do incite feelings, they are usually found in the portrayal of absences. The over-determined visual techniques that initially fail to communicate now become a source for emotions through that very void; the absence is more haunting than the presence.

Conclusion: Picture (Im)Perfect

Although each novelist has a unique approach to visuals beyond the visual breakdown of language, they all represent sight through absence by manipulating both the text and the images portrayed in each novel. Rather than looking for obvious images to incite reader emotion, readers must deconstruct traditional ways of looking for meaning. The visuals parallel the adolescent characters' suppressed emotions. Through the text, the boys' feelings are there but not ever really exposed. In the struggle against their own rational ideas and education, each youth attempts to employ visuals to help them communicate and possibly gain understanding for themselves of the traumatic situations at hand. Furthermore, each author demonstrates that we as mature readers likewise have similar difficulties and can learn through the eyes of the child. Not only do readers see differently through the child's eyes, but the audience may find themselves likewise numb or hyperemotional when it comes to expressing their emotions and reacting to these feelings when confronted with tragedy.

CHAPTER FOUR

CONCLUSION: RESOLVING THE UNSOLVABLE

There is nothing now for us behind. So we must go forward.

-Dr. Trefusis, *The Astonishing Life of Octavian Nothing (Volume I)*

Like Yeats in his poem “Among School Children,” the deconstruction of traditional methods of education and thinking sends the very idea of what and how we learn into uncertainty, but ultimately Yeats and his contemporary counterparts—Mark Haddon, M.T. Anderson, and Jonathan Safran Foer—uphold the necessity of learning, just in an alternative way. Instead of learning through conventional methods, the authors invite the readers to participate in a relearning by constructing new ways of seeing. As Judith Plotz characterizes *Octavian Nothing*, each of the modern novels dealt with in this study is both “a *Bildungsroman* that is also a self-destroying *anti-Bildungsroman*” (3). While the characters support and maintain their logical reasoning up until the end of the novels and occasionally this order seduces even the adult reader, eventually readers see the limitations this thinking holds. However, by juxtaposing the need for emotion and the power of reason, both emotion and reason cannot be taken as absolutes in life. The tension between the seemingly opposite sides of reason and emotions, similar to the tension which arises between the child and adult viewpoint, holds the capability to subtly reveal “truths.” Through juxtaposition and manipulation, the authors negotiate for a more acceptable and encompassing way of dealing with tragedy. The authors suggest that as humans, we are neither strictly rational nor sentimental but a balance of both. Furthermore, the child in literature often stands as a beacon of hope by offering light in

an otherwise traumatic and uncertain circumstance, which is a secondary yet essential part of the narrative message and relearning.

A Beacon of Light at the End of the Tunnel

Tragic circumstances, like those in the modern novels dealt with in this study, require hope in order for life to continue on. However, since we cannot solve traumatic events through reason and logic alone, as the literary works remind us and teach us, there will be no complete solution when it comes to grief. As Oskar, Octavian, and Christopher show their readers, absences and emotions will continuously plague the individual. Although the children succeed in the quests for discovery they participate in—the puzzles—more questions are left at the end of each novel instead of direct answers. As products of their time, these authors move away from the conventional Sherlock Holmes detective genre, characterized by the strength of deductive reasoning, and lend themselves to more contemporary questions. Ala Alryyes notes, “A central focus of the modernist novel of the twentieth century is the problematization of the knowable” (221), and the youthful protagonists’ struggle with reason and emotion certainly falls under the category of problematizing the knowable and solvable. By deconstructing absolutes and conventional ways of thinking, the children are left partially in limbo by the end of the novel.

In the end of *Extremely Loud*, Oskar, for example, reconnects with his mother yet is still left wishing he could turn back time. He pulls out the pages of his journal, *Stuff That Happened to Me*, and reverses the pictures flipping the whole story backwards,

noting, “And if I’d had more pictures, he [his father] would’ve flown through the window, back into the building, and the smoke would’ve poured into the hole that the plane was about to come out of. . . . We would have been safe” (325-26). Oskar is unable to fully escape his grief over the loss of his father. Christopher (who has the opposite problem of Oskar’s hyperemotional state) gets his own dog to love and similarly reconnects with his mother at the end of the novel, which would likewise seem to promote a happy and complete ending. He does not feel the same absence and grief Oskar continues to feel; however, there are still visible tensions among the family unit, signally a more complicated ending. Christopher’s father continues to be in his life, but Christopher still has fears from when his father physically hit him. He explains one situation where, “Mother got flu and I had to spend three days with Father and stay in his house. But it was OK because Sandy [the new dog] slept on my bed so he would bark if anyone came into the room during the night” (220). Christopher no longer seems to be upset with his father, but he is still wary and cautious. Critic Jay McInerney summarizes the book’s conclusion: “Christopher’s book seemingly has a tidy ending, as he would have wished—horrified as he is of indeterminacy. But this tidiness is an illusion, as the gulf between Christopher and his parents, between Christopher and the rest of us, remains immense and mysterious.” *Octavian Nothing* appears to have the most conclusive and happiest ending when he escapes his captors, but Octavian’s narrative ends with a promise for a sequel, an upcoming volume II, to continue the story that cannot be completed in just one volume. Readers sense that more problems will arise for Octavian and that the escape is only a new beginning to these further difficulties.

With a tidy ending, however, each novel could not offer hope for the future. Rather than a closed or even open ending, the novels conclude with a degree of aperture. This allows the audience to actively use their own imagination to predict the psychological state of the child character in the future. The texts offer up hope by demonstrating that some problems, although not solved, can be resolved. We see this resolution already beginning to occur at the end of each novel where the child comes to terms with his emotional difficulties while still visibly displaying some concerns. Children in literature can offer hope in much of the same way they offer up a relearning for the adult audience sharing their experiences. The children introduce a hopeful element to the otherwise inconclusive novels through the puzzles and their very being as children capable of growth.

The text invites readers to view through the lens of the child, not only through their position as implied author, but also through their innate characteristics as children. Just as the child evokes notions of learning because of his or her capacity to rapidly gain knowledge from a state of innocence and inexperience, the child also contains the capacity to grow. Both of these ideas, learning and growth, hint that the child will be okay, even if they are still struggling to develop and understand their grief by the end of the novel. As much as their learning is deconstructed, the texts still recognize the need and ability for both the child character and the reader to learn (or relearn). By leaving the conclusions without a completely happily-ever-after ending, the authors leave their protagonists' future psychological development up to the reader's imagination. Readers could easily conclude that the youths will probably continue to mature emotionally.

While the children as symbolic constructions offer optimistic outlooks, the puzzles likewise help alleviate the untidy endings with a glimpse of hope. The puzzles that are parallel to the storyline foreshadow a resolution through their solutions. If we look at the entire book as being parallel to the puzzle within the narrative, we find that solutions to problems, whether found through concrete facts or emotional support, can be resolved if not immediately then eventually, and if not completely, at least partially. The authors internally manipulate the typical structure of the puzzle or the detective mystery but leave the end solvable, unlike the search for truth in *La colmena*. Michael Thomas comments on the unresolved puzzle in *La colmena*:

[Cela's] modernist desire for discoverable truth is explicit in the narration, but his technique and conclusion point to and actually foreshadow a more postmodernist view of the world. The narrator pointedly focuses the story in the last chapter implying an impending crisis and climax at hand, only to send us away empty-handed with no climax, no solution, and no hope.

(226)

Like Cela's *La colmena*, the characters within each novel dealt with in this study hold onto a strong belief in the power of reasoning to solve problems and discover truths. However, unlike *La colmena*, there is an element of hope at the end of each novel. There is a solution to the mysteries, although not a tidy solution to the children's grief and emotional difficulties, and this solution foreshadows what is to come at the end of each novel and the future of the child outside of the novel. By the end, each child has begun to come to terms with their harsh situations through their quests to establish meaning and

truth from disorder. Ellen Pifer reasons that “the ability to wrest order and meaning from chaos affirms hope” (172). The presence of the puzzles in the novels indicates an eventual solution, even if it can’t be found immediately or at the novel’s close—that in itself is resolution. The endings are inconclusive but not damning or tragic.

The element of hope also works to further connect these novels to the genre styles of children’s literature, since hope is such a major factor in the didactic voice behind children’s literature. Maria Nikolajeva specifically points out that children’s novels need a “happy ending” or some sort of conclusion in her book *The Rhetoric of Character in Children’s Literature* (170). In her conference paper, Judith Plotz stands firm in her belief that hope is “the one non-negotiable element in juvenile writing” (9). This connection with children’s literature once again suggests that the adult audience has something to gain from the child’s perspective. Like the children learn, so too do the adult readers who find that all problems are not solvable but life will go on.

These texts ultimately question Wordsworth’s original assumption that children are innocent and the preceding notion that we as a society must maintain this innocence by protecting children from traumatic events. Children’s literature studies have now largely begun to move away from a protection role and acknowledge the necessity of educating children about the horrors of reality. In his essay called “A’ is for Auschwitz: Psychoanalysis, Trauma Theory, and the ‘Children’s Literature of Atrocity,’” Kenneth Kidd muses about the reason behind this shift and finds, “Presumably the exposure model because necessary because we no longer have the luxury of denying the existence of or postponing the child’s confrontation with evil” (120-21). Scholar Richard Flynn similarly

reminds his audience that children are not simply “infantile, vulnerable, voracious consumers” but are human beings, in his study on Scholastic Books’ 9/11 resources (10). He urges readers to combat the notion that difficult emotions should be simply forgotten or brushed aside. In her book *Radical Children’s Literature*, Kimberely Reynolds argues that showing ways to cope with traumatic instances through examples literature provides might help children’s psychological state well into adulthood (90).

Although these three novels cannot all be neatly categorized as children’s literature or adult fiction, their connection hints at the way our society should deal with trauma and the child, and I would also argue, trauma and the adult. Kimberely Reynolds theorizes:

The wounded child may symbolize a damaged self, but it may equally stand for a damaged culture; this means that if the image of the self as a child can be kept intact and unviolated, the myth of innocent childhood that Rose maintains is central to the well-being of adults and the works of children’s literature remains in place individually and socially. (90)

As Reynolds argues, the innocence myth can no longer stand, but the wounded child can certainly still stand as a symbol for a wounded culture. Society damages culture by avoiding and pacifying difficult situations instead of dealing with them. Each novel in this study demonstrates that the exposed child will eventually be okay despite an unsolved ending. The novels as adult fiction allow for more questions to be asked than answered at the end of the stories while their children’s literature characteristics offer a sense of hope for an audience who likewise have difficulties dealing with emotional

situations. As the string of photographs in *Extremely Loud* suggests, the media and other sources sometimes cloud our minds to the point of numbness. The rationality we focus on in society leave little room for a stake in emotional concerns and often take precedence over the individual, like *Octavian Nothing* points out. And other times while we as adults are in tune with our emotional concerns, we forget about other people's thoughts and feelings as *The Curious Incident* exposes. Like the child audience these texts evoke, adults likewise need to reconsider their actions or inactions in the face of trauma and recognize the potential in the stories that teach us that not everything can be fixed but life will still go on. Just as the moments of intertextuality in the novels provide the children with experiences beyond their own understanding, these novels provide life lessons to their adult readers.

Like the absences the visual images convey, the gulf remains by the end of every narrative but it is the unsolvable, with a ray of hope, that gives the most impact. In "The Remains of the Dog," McInerney declares, "And that gulf is ultimately the source of this novel's [*The Curious Incident*] haunting impact" (n.pag.) The suppression of emotion in circumstances where emotions run high can be as equally emotionally moving, if not more, than a text whose characters are able to openly confess their poignant feelings. Every one of the boys attempts to resist sentiment, but the novels do not fail to convey emotions, they only require the individual reader to find that emotion through their own interpretation of and reaction to the text. The authors force their readers to see and learn through what they are ultimately rarely able to get from the pages themselves. The need for a relearning appears evident when the texts constantly challenge preconceived notions

of everything from deductive reasoning to the way we see visuals, but this relearning does not become necessary or provide an impact until we as readers are thrown into emotional catharsis over the lack of emotional communication from the youthful characters. Through what we as readers expect but do not often get—sight, emotions, solutions, and truths—the works of literature dealt with in this study expose through absence, which create touching stories about the difficulties of dealing with tragedies in a rational world. Ultimately the texts root their adult readers inside the precocious mind of the child protagonist/narrator to the extent that we begin to question our own thinking in light of the human condition.

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